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Georges Simenon The Snow was Dirty



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THE SNOW WAS DIRTY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. *The Snow Was Dirty* was written in 1948, soon after Simenon received news of the death of his younger brother, Christian, who was killed on deployment with the French Foreign Legion in Vietnam.

Georges Simenon

THE SNOW WAS DIRTY

Translated by **HOWARD CURTIS**



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PART ONE

TIMO'S CUSTOMERS

1.

If it had not been for a chance event, what Frank Friedmaier did that night would not have been so significant. Obviously, Frank could not have foreseen that his neighbour Gerhardt Holst would pass along the street. The fact that Holst did pass, and recognized him, changed everything. But that, too, and all that was to follow from it, Frank accepted.

That was why what happened that night by the tannery wall meant more, for both his present and his future, than a loss of virginity.

Because that had been Frank's first thought, and it was a comparison that both amused and irritated him. His friend Fred Kromer – admittedly, Kromer was twenty-two – had killed a man a week earlier, right there outside Timo's, where Frank himself had been a few minutes before taking up his position against the tannery wall.

Did Kromer's kill really count? Kromer had headed for the door, buttoning up his fur-lined coat with his usual self-important air, a thick cigar between his thick lips. He was glistening. Kromer always glistened. He had thick skin like the skin of some oranges, skin that seemed to ooze sweat.

Someone had compared him to a young bull that can never get enough. It was certainly something sexual you thought of, looking at his thick, glistening face, his moist eyes, his swollen lips.

A thin, pale, feverish little man, the kind you saw a lot of, especially at night, had stupidly stood in his way – to look at him, you wouldn't think he had enough money to drink at Timo's – grabbed hold of his collar and berated him.

Had Kromer sold him something he wasn't pleased with?

Kromer had walked on in a dignified way, puffing at his cigar. The other man, the skinny one, maybe because he was with a woman he wanted to impress, had followed him out on to the pavement and started yelling.

People in Timo's street are not overly startled by yells. Patrols come that way as seldom as possible. But if any of those gentlemen had driven by, they would have been obliged to take a look.

'Go home to bed!' Kromer had said to the dwarf, who had a head too big for his body and a shock of bright red hair.

'Not before you've heard what I have to say . . .'

If you listened to everything people had to say to you, you would soon be locked up.

'Go home to bed!'

Had the red-haired man had too much to drink? Actually, he looked more like someone who takes drugs. Could it be that Kromer was his dealer, and the drugs were too adulterated? It hardly mattered.

There in the middle of the street, which was dark between two banks of snow, Kromer took his cigar out of his mouth with his left hand and hit the man, once, with his right fist. You saw two arms and two legs literally fly up in the air, like a puppet; then the black-clad form embedded itself in the heap of snow on the edge of the pavement. The funniest part of it was that a piece of orange peel lay next to the head, something that probably would not have been found anywhere else in the city except outside Timo's.

Timo came out, without a jacket or a cap, just as he was at the bar. He felt the puppet, and his lower lip jutted out slightly. 'His number's up,' he grunted. 'He'll be stiff in an hour.'

Did Kromer really kill the redhead with a single punch? That was what he said, and the other man would certainly not contradict him: following the advice of Timo, who never wasted time, the body was flung into the old basin 200 metres away, the one the sewers empty into, stopping the water from freezing over.

So Kromer can claim he killed a man. Even though Timo was also involved, and even though the puppet was not completely dead and had to be thrown up in the air again to get him over a low wall.

The proof that Kromer does not regard it as a serious kill is that he is still telling the story of the strangled girl. Only, that didn't happen in the city, or in a place the others know. There is no evidence it even happened at all. In a case like that, anybody can boast about anything.

'She had big breasts, almost no nose, and bright eyes,' he says.

That much has never changed. But each time he adds further details.

'It was in a barn . . .'

Maybe so. But what was Kromer, who has never been a soldier and who hates the country, doing in a barn?

‘We’d made love in the straw, and all the time the straw was tickling me and putting me in a bad mood . . .’

Kromer sucks on his cigar as he tells this story and looks straight ahead with an absent air, as if out of modesty. There is another detail he never changes. It is something the woman said.

‘I hope you’re giving me a child.’

He claims it is those words that set him off, that the thought of having a child with this stupid, dirty girl he was kneading like dough struck him as grotesque and unacceptable.

‘Completely un-acc-ept-ab-le.’

He also says that she was becoming increasingly affectionate and clinging.

And that without even needing to close his eyes, he started seeing a pale, monstrous head, fair-haired but faceless, that could have been his child and the girl’s.

Is it because Kromer’s as brown and hard as a tree?

‘It disgusted me,’ he concludes, dropping ash from his cigar.

He is clever. He knows how to play the part. He has mannerisms that make him interesting.

‘I found it easier to strangle the mother. That was the first time. And you know something? It’s very easy. No big deal.’

It isn’t just Kromer. Who, at Timo’s, hasn’t killed at least one man? In the war, or some other way. By denouncing him, maybe, which is the easiest. You don’t even have to sign your name.

Timo, who never boasts about it, must have killed lots, otherwise the occupiers wouldn’t let his bar stay open all night without sticking their nose into what goes on there. Even though the shutters are always closed, even though people have to approach by the lane and show their faces through the door, they aren’t so naive as not to know.

As far as Frank is concerned, his real loss of virginity was no big deal either. After all, he was in the right place. For others, it is a major event which they still talk about years later, adding embellishments, like Kromer with his strangled girl in the barn.

For Frank, killing his first man at the age of nineteen is a loss of virginity no more remarkable than the first. And as with the first, it is

unpremeditated. It just happens. It is as if a moment comes when it is both indispensable and natural to make a decision that has in fact been made long before.

Nobody has urged him to do it. Nobody has laughed at him. Only idiots let themselves be influenced by their friends!

For weeks, months even, he has been saying to himself, feeling a kind of inferiority inside, 'I have to try.'

Not in a fight. That isn't his style. In his mind, in order for it to count, it has to be done in cold blood.

And just now, the opportunity presented itself. Was it because he was watching out for it that it seemed like an opportunity?

They were in Timo's, at their table near the counter. There was Kromer in his fur-lined coat, which he always kept on even in places that were overheated. With his cigar, of course. And his glistening skin. And his big eyes that really do have something bovine about them. Kromer must think he is of a different species from the rest of the world, because he doesn't even bother to put large banknotes in a wallet, but stuffs them, big crumpled wads of them, in his pockets.

With Kromer was a man Frank did not know, someone who wasn't from their circle, who immediately said by way of introduction, 'Call me Berg.'

He must be at least forty. He is cold, secretive. He is clearly somebody. The proof of that is that Kromer is behaving in an almost humble way towards him.

He told him the story of the strangled girl, without insisting, as if it were nothing, just a joke, a passing fancy.

'Look at this, Frank. *My friend* just gave me this knife.'

Like a jewel that gains by being extracted from a rich casket, the knife was all the more glamorous for emerging from that warm fur-lined coat and being displayed on the check tablecloth.

'Feel the edge.'

'Yes.'

'Can you read the make?'

It was a Swedish-made flick knife, so straight and sharp it was as if its blade must have a mind of its own, must find its own way into flesh.

For some reason Frank said – and was immediately ashamed of the childish tone he unwittingly adopted – 'Can I borrow it?'

'What for?'

‘Nothing.’

‘These toys aren’t meant for doing nothing.’

The other man was smiling, a slightly protective smile, as if listening to two kids boasting.

‘Can I borrow it?’

Not to do nothing with it, of course. Although quite what, he didn’t yet know. It was at that moment that he saw, at the table in the corner, under the lamp with the mauve silk shade, the fat sergeant, already crimson – purple because of the light – take off his belt and put it down among the glasses.

They all knew the sergeant. He was almost a mascot, like a family pet you are used to seeing in the same place. Among the occupiers, he was the only one to come regularly to Timo’s without hiding, without taking precautions, without asking them to be discreet.

He must have a name. Here, they called him the Eunuch. Because he was fat, so fat that his uniform was too tight for him, forming rolls of flesh around his waist and under his arms. He brought to mind a fat woman revealing the marks made by a corset on her soft flesh when she undresses. He had other rolls of flesh at the back of his neck and under his chin, and on his skull his silky hair was sparse and colourless.

He always sat in the same corner, invariably with two women, it didn’t matter who, as long as they were thin and brunette. It was said that he preferred them hairy.

When customers coming in gave a start on seeing his uniform – the uniform of the occupation police – Timo would lower his voice just a little and say, ‘Don’t worry. He isn’t dangerous.’

Did the Eunuch hear? Did he understand? He would order drinks by the carafe. One woman on his knee, another woman beside him on the banquette, he would whisper stories in their ears and laugh. He would drink, tell stories, laugh and make them drink, his hands shoved under their skirts.

He must have family somewhere in his country. Nuschi, who had toyed with his wallet, claimed that it was stuffed full of photographs of children of all ages. He called the girls by other names than their own. It amused him. He would buy them meals. He loved to see them eat, expensive dishes found only at Timo’s and in a few other places that are even harder to gain access to, places reserved for high-ranking officers.

He practically forced them to eat. He ate with them. He would touch them up in front of everyone, look at his wet fingers and laugh. Then,

regularly, a moment would come when he unbuckled his belt and put it on the table.

On the belt was a holster containing a revolver.

In itself, none of this mattered. The sergeant, the Eunuch, was a fat lecher, and everyone laughed when they mentioned him. Even Frank's mother Lotte.

She knew him, too. The whole neighbourhood knew him, because, in order to get to town, where he must have his office, he twice a day crossed the street where the tram runs and walked to the Old Bridge.

He did not live in the barracks. He lodged with Mrs Mohr, the widow of an architect, two houses further along from the street where the tram runs.

He was a neighbour. You saw him at the same times every day, always pink and glowing in spite of his nights at Timo's. He had a very particular smile, which some considered crafty, but might just have been a baby's smile.

He would turn round to look at little girls, smile simperingly at them and sometimes give them sweets, which he took from his pockets.

'I bet we'll see him come up here one of these days,' Frank's mother Lotte had said.

Her profession was legally banned. True, she was allowed to keep a manicure salon near the old basin, even though it was obvious that nobody would ever think of climbing three floors in an overflowing apartment building to have their nails seen to.

It was known not only in the street, but all over town, so to speak, that there were bedrooms in the back.

Being in the occupation police, the Eunuch was sure to know it, too.

'He'll come, you'll see!'

Just from seeing a man through the third-floor window, Lotte was capable of saying whether he would come up in the end or not. She could even predict how long he would take to make up his mind, and she was seldom wrong.

The Eunuch had indeed come, one Sunday morning – in other words, outside office hours – looking stupid and embarrassed. Frank was not at home at the time, and he regretted it, because of the fanlight that allowed him to see if he climbed on the kitchen table.

He had been told all about it. The only girl there that day was Steffi, who was tall and thin with dull skin, capable only of lying down, spreading her

legs and looking up at the ceiling.

The sergeant had been disappointed, probably because with Steffi there was nothing to do except go all the way. She wasn't even bright enough to listen properly to the stories she was told.

'You're just a hole, my girl,' Lotte often said to her.

The Eunuch must have imagined things would be different. Maybe he really was impotent? He had certainly never left Timo's with a woman.

Or maybe he pleased himself as he felt them up, without anyone noticing? It was possible. Everything is possible with men, Frank had known that since he had learned the ways of the world, standing on the kitchen table, looking through the fanlight.

Since he would have to kill someone sooner or later, wasn't it only natural that the idea should occur to him to try his hand with the Eunuch?

First of all, he just had to use the knife that had been slipped into his hands and which really was a beautiful weapon. He felt the desire to try it out, in spite of himself, to feel the effect it had when it entered a man's flesh and slid between his bones.

There is a trick he had been told about: to turn your hand slightly, like turning a key in a lock, once the blade is between the ribs.

The belt was on the table, with the smooth, heavy revolver in its holster. The things you can do with a revolver! The kind of man you automatically become!

Last but not least, there was this guy of forty, this Berg, a friend of Kromer's, in other words, someone who could be trusted, someone important probably. Frank must have been mentioned to him, but as if he was just a child.

'Just lend it to me for an hour and I'll try it out for you. I bet you I'll come back with a revolver!'

So at this point, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Frank knew the place to wait in ambush. On Green Street, which the Eunuch would have to take to get from the basin to the street where the tram runs, there was an empty old building, which was still called the tannery even though no tanning had gone on there for fifteen years. Actually, Frank had never known the tannery when it was operational; it was said that in the days when it worked for the army, it had up to 600 workers.

All that was there now were big bare walls of black brick with high windows like church windows, which didn't start until six metres from the

ground and all of whose panes were broken.

A dark alley, barely a metre wide, leading to a dead end, separated the tannery from the rest of the street.

The nearest lighted streetlamp – the city was full of twisted or smashed streetlamps – was a long way away, at the tram stop.

So it was quite simple, it didn't arouse any emotion in him. There he was, in the alley, back pressed up against the brick wall of the tannery, and apart from the mournful cries of the trains on the other side of the river, there was nothing but silence around him. Not a light in the windows. People were asleep.

Between the two walls, he could see part of a street, and it was the street as he had always known it during the winter months: on the pavements, the snow formed two greyish lines, one on the side of the buildings, the other on the side of the road; between the two, a narrow, blackish path, which people maintained with sand, salt or ashes. In front of each door, this path was cut across by another path leading to the roadway, where the tracks of wheels were deeper in some places than in others.

Quite simple.

Kill the Eunuch . . .

Uniformed men were killed every week, and it was patriotic organizations that were harassed; there would be hostages, councillors or other important people would be shot or taken away, never to be heard of again.

As far as Frank was concerned, it was all about killing his first man and trying out Kromer's Swedish knife.

Nothing more than that.

The one thing that bothered him was being up to his knees in hardened snow – because nobody ever thought of removing the snow from the alley – and feeling the fingers of his right hand get stiffer and stiffer. But he had decided not to keep his glove on.

He wasn't nervous when he heard footsteps. He knew it wasn't his sergeant. With his heavy boots, the sergeant would have made the snow crunch more.

He was intrigued, no more than that. The strides were too long to be a woman's. The curfew had started a long time ago. For a whole lot of reasons, that didn't bother people like him, like Kromer, like Timo's

customers, but those who lived in the neighbourhood weren't in the habit of venturing out at night.

The man was coming closer to the alley and already, even before seeing him, Frank knew, or rather guessed, and the fact that he had guessed gave him a kind of satisfaction.

It was because of the little yellow light swaying on the snow, the light of a torch the man was moving from side to side as he walked.

That long, almost silent stride, those steps at once soft and surprisingly fast, automatically made Frank think of his neighbour Gerhardt Holst.

It was quite natural that they should meet. Holst lived in the same building as Lotte, on the same floor. The door of his apartment was just opposite theirs. He was a tram driver, and his work schedule changed every week; sometimes, he left very early in the morning, before daybreak; at other times, he would descend the stairs in mid-afternoon, invariably with his tin box under his arm.

He was very tall. His steps were silent, because he wore boots he had made himself, with felt and pieces of rag. It is natural that a man who spends hours on the platform of a tram should try to keep his feet warm, and yet Frank, for no particular reason, couldn't see those shapeless boots, as grey as blotting paper – they seemed to have the texture of blotting paper – without a kind of unease.

The man was a uniform grey, as if made of the same material all over. He never seemed to look at anybody, or be interested in anything, only in his tin box, which he kept under his arm and which contained his meal.

And yet Frank would turn his head away to avoid his gaze, or at other times deliberately look Holst in the eyes with an aggressive air.

Holst was about to pass by. What of it?

There was every chance he would go on his way, throwing the circle of light from his torch on to the snow and the black path in front of him. Frank had no reason to make any noise. With his back up against the wall, he was practically invisible.

So why did he cough just as the man was about to reach the alley? He didn't have a cold. His throat wasn't dry. He had hardly smoked all evening.

When it came down to it, he coughed to attract attention. It wasn't even by way of a challenge! Where was the interest in challenging a poor man who drives a tram?

Admittedly, Holst wasn't a real tram driver. It was obvious he was from somewhere else, and that he and his daughter had led a different life. The streets are full of people like that. You see them in the queues outside the bakeries and you never give them a second glance. They are the ones who are ashamed at not feeling quite like the others and who assume a humble air.

The fact remains that Frank deliberately coughed.

Is it because of Holst's daughter Sissy? That wouldn't make any sense. He isn't in love with Sissy. She is a little thing of sixteen who doesn't impress him. He knows, though, that he impresses her.

Doesn't she sometimes half open her door when she hears him whistling as he climbs the stairs? Doesn't she run to the window when he goes out, and doesn't he see her move the curtain?

If he wanted her, he could have her whenever he liked. With a bit of patience maybe, and some manners, which isn't difficult.

The most surprising part of it is that Sissy must know who he is, and what profession his mother practises. The whole building despises them. Not many people even say hello to them.

Holst doesn't say hello to him either, but then he doesn't say hello to anyone. Not out of pride. Out of humility, rather, or because he is not interested in people, because he lives with his daughter in a little circle he feels no need to leave. There are people like that!

He isn't even mysterious.

Maybe it was simply out of playfulness that Frank coughed? It was too easy otherwise, too smooth.

Holst hasn't caught fright. He hasn't slowed down. He hasn't thought it might be him that someone is waiting to ambush in the alley. That is quite curious, too, because after all a man doesn't flatten himself against a wall, in the middle of the night, in a temperature of twenty below zero, for no reason!

All he does, as he passes the alley, is change the direction of his torch, just for a moment, long enough to light up Frank's face.

Frank hasn't even bothered to lift the collar of his coat, or turn his head away. So he is quite exposed, with that pensive, resolute air he always has, even when he is thinking only about trivial things.

Holst has seen him and recognized him. He only has 800 metres to go to get home. He will take his key from his pocket: thanks to his night work, he

is the only one of the tenants to have a key.

Tomorrow, he will find out from the newspapers – or simply standing in a queue outside some shop or other – that the sergeant was killed on the corner of the alley.

And then he will know.

What will he decide to do? The occupiers will announce a reward, as usual when one of their men is killed, especially when it is an officer. Holst and his daughter are poor, they probably don't eat meat more than once a fortnight, and most often it is just scraps to be boiled with swedes. Thanks to the smells escaping through the doors, it is possible to tell what the people in each apartment eat.

What will Holst do?

He can't be happy to see a trade like Lotte's being plied just opposite his apartment, where Sissy spends her days.

Isn't it an opportunity to get rid of them?

And yet Frank coughed and doesn't dream for a moment of giving up his plan. On the contrary! For a few moments, he practically prays that the sergeant will turn the corner of the street before Holst has had time to get home.

Holst would hear him, see him. Maybe he would wait a moment, with his key in his hand, and so become a witness?

That doesn't happen. A pity! Frank was quite excited at the thought of it. Already it seems to him that there is a secret link between him and the man who is now climbing the stairs in the dark building.

It isn't because of Holst that he is going to kill the Eunuch, of course: that was decided before.

But at that point, his act was meaningless. It was almost a joke, a playful prank. What did he call it? A loss of virginity.

Now, though, it is something else he wants, something that he accepts, in full awareness of the facts.

There is Holst, Sissy and him. The sergeant fades into the background. Kromer and his pal Berg don't matter any more.

There is Holst and him.

It is really as if he chose Holst, as if he always knew that this would happen at a given moment, because he wouldn't have done it for anybody else apart from the tram driver.

Half an hour later, he was at Timo's, knocking at the little door at the end of the lane, in the agreed way. Timo opened the door himself. There was almost nobody there now, and one of the girls who had been drinking earlier with the Eunuch was throwing up into the kitchen sink.

'Has Kromer gone?'

'Oh, yes. He told me to let you know he had an appointment in the upper town.'

The knife was in Frank's pocket, wiped clean. Timo was rinsing glasses, paying no attention to Frank.

'You having a drink?'

He almost answered yes. But he preferred to prove to himself that he wasn't agitated, that he didn't need alcohol. And yet it had taken him two attempts, because of the layer of fat on the sergeant's back. The revolver was swelling his other pocket.

Should he show it to Timo? There was no danger. Timo would keep quiet. But it was too easy. It was what everyone would have done.

'Goodnight!'

'Are you sleeping at your mother's?'

He slept in all kinds of places, sometimes in the little house behind Timo's, where the girls rented rooms, sometimes at Kromer's – Kromer had a nice room with a divan – sometimes at other people's houses, taking pot luck. But there was always a camp bed for him in Lotte's kitchen.

'I'm going home.'

It was dangerous, because of the body still lying across the pavement. It was more dangerous to go the long way round by the main street – coming back across the bridge – because over there, he might run into a patrol.

The dark heap was still on the pavement, partly on the black path, partly on the heap of snow, and Frank stepped over it. It was the only moment when he was afraid. Not only of hearing footsteps behind him, but of seeing the Eunuch get up again, for example.

He rang the bell and waited a while for the caretaker to open the door by pressing the button at the head of his bed. He climbed the first steps quite quickly, then slowed down and finally, just as he was passing Holst's door, under which light was filtering, he started to whistle, to let them know it was him.

He didn't go into his mother's room: she was a deep sleeper. He undressed in the kitchen, where he had lit the lamp. He lay down. The place

smelled of soup and leeks, and the odour was so strong it stopped him from sleeping.

So he got up, half opened the door at the back and shrugged.

It was Bertha who was occupying the bed tonight. Her big, insipid body was quite warm. He pushed her from behind, and she groaned and reached out an arm, which he had to fold over to make room for himself.

Sometime later, he almost had sex with her, because he couldn't get to sleep, but then he thought of Sissy, who must be a virgin.

Would her father tell her what Frank had done that night?

2.

When Bertha got out of bed, he half woke and opened his eyes just wide enough to see big flowers of frost on the windowpanes.

Barefoot, Bertha went to the kitchen and switched on the light, leaving the door ajar, so that the bedroom was lit only by the reflected glow. Then he heard her putting on her stockings, underwear and dressing gown at the far end of the room and finally leaving and shutting the door behind her. The next noise would be the scraping of the poker on the grate next door.

His mother knew how to tame them. She was always careful to keep at least one in the house overnight. Not because of the clients: nobody came up after eight o'clock at night, when the downstairs door was closed. But Lotte needed company. Above all, she needed to be served.

'I starved enough when I was young and stupid; now I can afford to take it easy. It's their turn now.'

It was always the poorest and meekest she kept behind, on the pretext that they lived too far, that there was a fire or that she had made a good dinner.

All of them were given the same purple flannelette dressing gown to wear, which was too long for most of them and trailed on the ground. They were invariably between sixteen and eighteen years old. Lotte did not want them older. And with a few rare exceptions, she never kept them more than a month.

Clients love change. It was pointless telling that to the girls in advance. They felt they were at home, especially those from the country, and it was almost always they who stayed the night.

Lotte must be doing the same as Frank, who was only half asleep, aware of the time, the place where he was, the noises in the apartment and the noises on the street. In this way, he listened mechanically for the din of the first tram, which could be heard coming from a long way away in the frozen

emptiness of the streets, and imagined he could actually see the big yellow light.

This was immediately followed by the clatter of the two coal buckets. That was the hardest thing in the morning for the girl on duty. One of them, even though she was a strong, muscular girl, had actually left because of having to perform that chore. What they had to do was climb down three floors with the two black metal buckets, then another floor into the cellar, and come back up again with both buckets full.

Everyone in the building got up early; it was like a house of ghosts because, thanks to the restrictions and the power cuts, people only used very weak electric bulbs these days. On top of that, they didn't have fire and dared use only a tiny bit of gas to heat their acorn coffee.

Every time the coal buckets were taken down, Frank would listen out, and Lotte was probably doing the same in her bed.

Each tenant had his own cellar, closed by a padlock. But who apart from them had coal or wood?

When the girl came back up with the buckets, arms stretched, face flushed, there were almost always doors that half opened as she passed and eyes that stared harshly at her, and at the buckets. Women exchanged comments out loud. Once, a tenant on the second floor – he had been shot since, but not for that – had knocked over the two buckets, muttering, 'Whore!'

All of them, from top to bottom of the barracks – because the building was like a barracks – would still be muffled in their overcoats, with two or three cardigans, most with their gloves on. And the children had to go to school.

Bertha had gone down. Bertha wasn't afraid. She was one of the few, perhaps because she was strong and placid, to have held out for more than six weeks.

But she was useless when it came to lovemaking. She sometimes let out such a strange howl that the man was unable to go all the way.

'A cow!' Frank always thought, just as he thought of Kromer as a young bull.

They would have made a good couple. Bertha was lighting the fires in the stoves, including the one in the bedroom, once again leaving the kitchen door ajar. There were four fires in the apartment, more than in all the rest of the building, four fires just for them. Maybe one day people would stand

outside in the corridor and filch a bit of heat by pressing themselves flat against their wall?

Did Sissy Holst have fire?

He knew how it was; he was familiar with that little blue flame emerging from the gas stove, and only between seven and eight in the morning.

People warmed their fingers at the kettle. There were some who put their feet, or their stomachs, on the stove. And all of them covered themselves in cast-offs, in everything they could heap on their backs, one thing on top of another.

Sissy?

Why had he thought about Sissy?

In the building opposite, which was poorer than theirs, because it was older and already dilapidated, people had stuck wrapping paper on the windows to keep out the cold, leaving only little holes in the paper to let in the light and to look out.

Could they see the Eunuch? Had the body been discovered?

It would happen without fuss. There was never any fuss. A lot of people had already left for work, and the women were going out to take their places in the queues.

Unless there was a patrol, which was unlikely – there are almost never any patrols in Green Street, which leads practically nowhere – the early risers had seen the dark heap on the snow and hurried to the tram stop.

Now that daylight had come, the others could probably make out the colour of the uniform, which would make them all the more anxious to get away.

It would come about through one of the caretakers. Caretakers are like civil servants. They can't pretend they haven't seen anything. They have telephones at their disposal, in the corridors of their buildings.

A smell of burning tinder came from the kitchen. Then there were avalanches of ash in the other stoves and, finally, the music of the coffee mill.

Poor dumb Bertha! Earlier, standing barefoot on the rug, she had rubbed her whole body in order to smooth out the folds made on her skin by the sheets. She hadn't put on trousers. She was glistening with sweat. She must be talking to herself. Two months earlier, at this hour, she had been feeding the hens, probably talking to them in a language they understood.

And always the tram, coming to an abrupt halt at the corner of the street, spitting sand on the rails as it braked. They were used to it, and yet it was as if they were held in suspense, waiting for it to leave again in a clatter of iron.

Which of the caretakers had been scared enough to phone the authorities? Caretakers are always scared. It is their job. It was easy to imagine this one gesticulating at two or three cars full of occupiers.

There was a time when they would have thrown a cordon around the neighbourhood and searched the buildings one by one. They don't do that any more. They don't take hostages either. It is as if men have grown philosophical, on both sides of the barrier. Is there even still a barrier?

They will go through the motions.

A fat pervert is dead. What can it possibly matter to them? They must have known what he was like. They will be more worried about the missing revolver, because whoever took it might be thinking of using it against them.

They're scared, too, when it comes down to it. Everyone is scared.

Two cars, three cars pass up and down the street. There is another going from building to building.

It is just for show. Nothing will happen.

Unless, of course, Holst gets it into his head to talk. But Holst won't talk. Frank trusts him.

Yes, that's the explanation! It may not be exactly the right word, but it gives an idea of what he was vaguely thinking last night: he trusts him.

Holst must be asleep. No. He is up by now, he will be going downstairs, because when it is not his shift, he is the one who takes his place in the queues.

Lotte also queues – or rather, sends one of the girls – for some items, but not for others. Even for them, there are some things it is worth putting yourself out for.

All the inner doors are open. The kitchen stove radiates heat through all the rooms, at a pinch it might be enough; then there is the smell of real coffee spreading.

On the other side of the kitchen, looking out on the landing, just to the left of the staircase, is the manicure salon, where the stove is permanently lit.

And each stove, each fire, has its own smell, its own life, its own way of breathing, its more or less incongruous noises. The one in the salon smells of linoleum, evoking the room itself with its polished furniture, its upright piano, the embroidery and crochet work on the pedestal tables and on the arms of the armchairs.

‘The real perverts,’ Lotte claims, ‘are the middle-class men. And middle-class men like to do their nasty little business in an atmosphere that reminds them of home.’

That is why the two manicure tables are tiny, virtually invisible. On the other hand, Lotte teaches the girls to play the piano with one finger.

‘Like their daughters, don’t you see?’

The bedroom, the big bedroom, as it is called, where Lotte is sleeping right now, is stuffed with rugs and drapes and hand-made trinkets.

Another of Lotte’s assertions is: ‘If only I could put up pictures of their fathers, mothers, wives and children, I’d be a millionaire!’

Have they finally taken the Eunuch away? It is quite likely. The cars have stopped driving up and down.

Gerhardt Holst, his long nose blue with cold, his string bag in his hand, must be standing motionless and dignified in some queue in the neighbourhood. Some people accept that, others don’t. Frank has never accepted it. He would never stand in a queue for anything in the world.

‘Other people do it,’ his mother said to him once. She thinks he is proud.

It is hard to imagine Kromer in a queue. Or Timo, or any of the others.

Does Lotte have coal? Won’t the first thing she talks about later, when she gets up, be food?

‘In my house, we eat!’ she once said in answer to a girl who had never been a prostitute before and who asked her how much she would earn.

And it’s true. They eat. More than that, they stuff themselves. They stuff themselves from morning to night. There is always food on the kitchen table; an entire family could be fed with the leftovers.

It has become a kind of game to look for the most difficult dishes to make, those that contain the highest fat content or use ingredients that are impossible to find. It is a sport.

‘Bacon? Go to see Kopotzki. Tell him I sent you and that I can get him some sugar.’

How about adding some mushrooms?

‘Take the tram and stop at Blang’s. Tell him . . .’

Every meal is a challenge. A challenge and an act of defiance, because the whole building receives the kitchen smells filtering out through the locks and under the doors. They would gladly leave the doors open.

Meanwhile, the Holsts have to be content with a bone and some swedes.

What has got into him? Why is he constantly thinking about the Holsts? He gets up. He has had enough of staying in bed. He goes into the kitchen, rubbing his bleary eyes. It is eleven o'clock. A girl he doesn't know has arrived, a new girl. She looks quite respectable. She hasn't yet taken off her hat and she is wearing a maidenly white blouse.

'Don't be afraid of taking sugar,' Lotte says to her. She is sitting in her dressing gown, her elbows on the table, drinking her coffee and milk in small sips.

That's always the way it goes. They have to be broken in. At first, they don't dare. They look at the pieces of sugar as if they were precious objects. Same with the milk, with everything. And after a time, you are forced to show them the door because they start ransacking the wardrobes. Of course, they would have to be shown the door anyway, even without that.

They're always well behaved. They press their knees together when they sit down. Most of them wear little tailored suits, like Sissy, with dark skirts and light-coloured blouses.

'If only they didn't change!'

That is what the clients like.

Not the morning sloppiness, for example. But then, who knows? There they all are, like a family, unwashed, sweaty, drinking coffee, eating what they like, smoking, lounging about.

'Will you iron my trousers?' Frank asks his mother.

Since the power socket is in the salon, Lotte sets up an ironing board there, between two armchairs.

What about the Eunuch?

Some of the neighbours have probably started to feel scared because of him, all those who saw the body in the snow this morning and who, because of that, will have an uneasy conscience all day.

But the only thing that has had Frank worried is the revolver. About nine, he got up for a moment, thinking he should take it out of his coat pocket and hide it somewhere.

But hide it where? Hide it from whom?

Bertha is too soft, too spineless, to reveal anything, unless out of stupidity.

The other girl, the little one in the suit whose name he does not yet know, will keep quiet because she is new, because she feels at home, because she is hungry.

As for his mother, he doesn't care about her. He's the boss. Whatever she does, however much she sometimes rebels, she knows she can't say anything and that she will always end up doing what Frank wants.

He isn't tall. In fact, he is quite short. He has even – though not for a long time now – worn high heels, almost a woman's heels, to look taller. He isn't fat either, but plump, with square shoulders.

His complexion is light, like Lotte's, his hair is fair, his eyes blue-grey.

Why are the girls scared of him? He is only nineteen. There are times when you would take him for a child! He would probably be capable of being gentle, if he wanted. He can't be bothered.

And the most surprising thing for his age is how calm he is. Even when he was little, and could barely walk, when he had a big head and curly hair, people used to say that he was like a little man.

He doesn't exert himself. He doesn't gesticulate. He is seldom seen running, seldom gets angry, and even more seldom raises his voice.

One of the girls, whom he quite often shared a bed with, would take his head in her arms and ask him why he was always so sad.

She refused to believe him when he replied in a curt tone, pulling away from her, 'I'm not sad. I've never been sad in my life.'

Maybe it was true. He wasn't sad, but he didn't feel the need to laugh or joke either. He always stayed calm, and that was probably what people found disturbing.

Even now, thinking of Holst, he is perfectly calm. He doesn't feel the slightest bit anxious. Maybe just a little intrigued.

Here, they drink coffee with sugar and real cream, they spread butter on bread along with jam or honey. It is almost white bread, the kind you probably wouldn't find anywhere in the neighbourhood except at Timo's.

What do they eat in the apartment opposite? What does Gerhardt Holst eat? What does his daughter Sissy eat?

'You've had hardly any breakfast,' Lotte remarks – she, of course, has stuffed herself as usual.

She used to be so hungry in the days when other people ate that she is always afraid he isn't eating enough and would happily force-feed him like a goose.

He can't be bothered to get dressed. He has nothing to do outside at this hour anyway. He lounges about. He watches Lotte ironing his trousers, carefully scuffing away a few stains with the tips of her painted nails. Then he follows the new girl with his eyes. He sees her lay out on the little table the manicure equipment she does not know how to use.

On the back of her still slender neck, where the skin is so thin it reminds him of a chicken's, there are stray little strands of hair, which she tries sometimes to lift with a mechanical gesture.

Sissy often does the same thing when she is going up or down the stairs.

The new girl, as Lotte has already taught her, calls him Mr Frank. He asks her name, out of politeness.

'Minna.'

Her skirt is well cut, the material barely worn, and she seems clean. Has she ever made love before? It is likely, otherwise she wouldn't have come to Lotte's. But she has probably never done it for money, with just anybody.

Later, when there is a client, he will climb up on the kitchen table. He is sure in advance that once she is down to her slip, she will turn to the wall and fiddle for a long time with her straps before stripping off completely.

Sissy is just on the other side of the landing. When you emerge from the wide staircase, there is one door on the left and another on the right, before the corridor itself, off which other doors open. Some tenants occupy a whole apartment, others just a room, and there are three more floors above their heads. All the time, people can be heard going up and down. The women carry string bags and packages, and the more time passes, the harder they find the climb; one of them even fainted on the stairs a few days ago, and she is only in her thirties.

He has never been inside the Holsts' apartment. He does know some of the interiors, because tenants sometimes leave their doors open; some women do their washing in the corridor, even though it is forbidden by the landlord.

Everywhere, during the day, there is a pervasive light that is too harsh, almost icy, because the windows are high and wide, the stairwell and corridors are painted white, and the snow outside is reflected throughout the building.

‘Have you ever learned the piano?’ Lotte asks the new girl.

‘I can play a little, madam.’

‘Then would you mind playing us a piece?’

By tonight, Lotte will be a lot more familiar with her, but at the start she is always polite to them.

There isn’t a trace of white in Lotte’s sandy hair; her face is still young. If she didn’t eat so much, if she didn’t let herself put on weight, she would be a beautiful woman, but she doesn’t care about her figure, on the contrary it is as if she is quite happy to gain weight; it seems to be deliberate on her part to always leave her dressing gown half open over her soft, heavy breasts, which shake every time she moves.

‘Your trousers are ironed. Are you going out?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

He would happily sleep all day. That’s not possible, because the rooms have to be done, and sometimes clients arrive as early as midday. He rarely meets his friends before five. None of the people he knows really start living until the end of the day, so that for hours on end he just lounges about.

He often stays in the kitchen in his dressing gown, unwashed and uncombed, his feet on the door of the stove, his feet in the stove, reading some book or other, and, if the fancy takes him, he gets on the table when he hears voices in the room.

Today, without being too aware of it, he prowls around the new girl, who is playing the piano and doesn’t play badly. But he is not really bothered about her. His thoughts keep returning to Holst and Sissy, and that puts him in a bad mood. He doesn’t like a thought to plague him like that, like a fly on a stormy day.

‘Someone’s at the door, Frank.’

The piano has almost drowned out the noise of the doorbell. Lotte puts away the ironing board and the iron, makes sure that everything is tidy, and says to Minna, ‘Carry on.’

Then she half opens the door, recognizes the visitor and murmurs half-heartedly, ‘Oh, it’s you, Mr Hamling. Come in. Would you mind leaving us alone, Minna?’

Holding her dressing gown with one hand, she moves a chair closer to the visitor.

‘Sit down. Why don’t you take off your galoshes?’

‘I shan’t stay long.’

Minna has joined Frank in the kitchen. In the next room, Bertha is making the bed. The new girl is nervous and worried.

‘Is he a client?’ she asks.

‘He’s from the police, a chief inspector.’

That puts her in even more of a panic, while Frank remains calm and slightly scornful.

‘Don’t worry. He’s a friend of my mother’s!’

It’s almost true. Hamling knew Lotte in the old days, when she was a young girl. Was there something between them? It’s possible. In any case, now he is a man in his fifties, well built, with not an ounce of fat on him. He is probably not married. If he is, he never talks about his wife, and doesn’t wear a wedding ring.

Everyone in the neighbourhood is scared of him, except Lotte.

‘You can come in, Frank.’

‘Hello, inspector.’

‘Hello, young man.’

‘Frank, why don’t you pour Mr Hamling a drink? I’d love one, too.’

The chief inspector’s visits always follow the same pattern. It really does seem, as he enters, as if he has simply come to say hello as a neighbour, as a friend. He accepts the chair he is offered, and the little drink. He smokes his cigar, unbuttons his big black overcoat and gives a little sigh of satisfaction, like a man delighted to warm himself, to take a short break in a snug, friendly atmosphere.

You always think he is going to say something, ask a question. In the early days, Lotte was convinced he was trying to find out what went on in her apartment.

Even though they knew each other in the past, they lost touch for years, and he is a police inspector after all.

‘It’s good,’ he declares, putting his drink down on one of the pedestal tables.

‘It’s the best you can find these days.’

Then silence falls, a silence that does not bother Kurt Hamling in the least. Maybe he does it deliberately, because he knows it disorientates other people, especially Lotte, who is only quiet when she has her mouth full.

He looks calmly at the open piano, so innocent-looking, and the two little tables with the manicure set. He saw Minna as she left the room to go to the

kitchen and must realize that she is new. He heard the piano from the landing.

What does he think? Nobody knows. They have talked about it on several occasions.

He must know what Lotte does for a living. Once he came in the afternoon – actually, it was the only time – when there was a client in the bedroom. The noises that could be heard coming from the salon would not have deceived anyone.

On the pretext of keeping an eye on her stew, Lotte went through the kitchen and told the man not to leave until she gave him the all-clear.

That time, exceptionally, Hamling stayed for two hours, for no reason, with no excuse, still with his air of paying a social visit.

Could it be that he knows Minna? Could her parents have alerted the police?

Lotte is all smiles. Frank, on the other hand, looks at him harshly, making no attempt to conceal the fact that he doesn't like him. Hamling has hard features and a hard body; he is a man of stone, making the contrast with his small eyes, which sparkle with irony, all the more striking. He always seems to be making fun of you.

'Those gentlemen had work to do in your street today.'

Frank doesn't move a muscle. His mother can barely restrain herself from looking at him, as if sensing that her son had something to do with it.

'A fat sergeant was killed near the tannery, a hundred metres from here. He spent the night in the snow. He'd just left Timo's.'

All this is said as if casually. He picks up his glass again, warms it in the hollow of his hand and slowly dips his lips in it.

'I didn't hear anything,' Lotte says.

'There were no shots, he was stabbed. They've already arrested someone.'

Why does Frank immediately think *Holst*?

It's stupid. All the more stupid as it isn't him at all.

'You probably know him, Frank, he's a boy your age, who lives with his mother in this building. On the first floor, right at the end of the corridor on the left. He's a violinist.'

'I've sometimes met a young man with a violin case.'

'I've forgotten his name. He claims he didn't leave his apartment last night, and his mother, of course, backs him up. He also states that he's

never set foot in Timo's. It's nothing to do with us. It's those gentlemen who are handling the investigation. I've been told that his violin was just a front, that the black case he always had under his arm most often contained documents. Apparently, he belonged to a terrorist group.'

Why should Frank flinch? He lights another cigarette. 'I got the impression he has TB,' he says.

It's true. Several times, he has passed on the stairs a tall, raw-boned young man, always dressed in black, with a coat that is too thin and a violin case under his arm. He was always pale, with red blotches under his eyes and a mouth that was too red, and he would sometimes stop on the stairs to cough himself hoarse.

Hamling used the word *terrorist*, like the occupiers. Others use the word patriot. It doesn't mean anything. Especially coming from a public official. It's quite difficult to guess what he thinks.

Does Kurt Hamling despise his mother and him? Not because of the girls – that doesn't interest him. But because of the rest, the coal, their contacts with lots of people, the officers who come here?

Supposing Hamling wanted to do something against Lotte, what would happen? Lotte would get in touch with people she knows in the military police, or else Frank would talk to Kromer, who has a long reach.

At the end of the day, those gentlemen would summon the chief inspector and order him to back off.

That's why, deep down, Lotte isn't scared any more. Does Hamling know that?

He comes to her apartment, sits down, warms himself at her fire, agrees to drink her alcohol.

And Holst?

With some of the tenants, it is easy to know exactly what they think. Most of them hate and despise Frank and his mother. Some lips curl with anger when they pass.

For some, it is simply because Lotte has coal and enough to eat. Maybe they would do the same if they could. For others, especially women of a certain age or fathers of families, it is because of her profession.

But there are some who are different. Frank knows it, senses it. And they are the ones who show their feelings the least. They don't even look at them, pretending, as if out of a sense of propriety, to ignore their presence.

Is that the case with Holst? Does he, like the young man with the violin, belong to a resistance network?

It's unlikely. Frank did think it for a while, because of his calm, his apparent serenity. And also because he isn't a real tram driver; he comes across as some sort of intellectual. Could he have been a teacher who was dismissed for his opinions? Or did he voluntarily leave his job in order not to teach things he didn't believe in?

Apart from his hours of work, he never goes out, except to queue. Nobody comes to see them.

Does he already know that the violinist has been arrested? He is bound to find out sooner or later. The caretaker, who does know, will tell all the tenants, except Lotte and her son.

And Hamling just sits there dreamily, without saying another word, sucking at his cigar and sending out little puffs of smoke.

Even if he knows or suspects something, why should Frank be bothered? He won't dare talk.

What matters is Gerhardt Holst, who must have come back from his shopping expedition and who is now shut in with Sissy in the apartment opposite.

A few vegetables, some swedes, maybe a small piece of rancid bacon, the kind that is available every once in a while?

They don't see anybody, don't talk to anybody. What can they possibly say to each other?

And Sissy listens out for Frank, lifts the curtain to watch him walk away down the street, half opens the door when she hears him whistling on the stairs.

Hamling sighs and gets to his feet.

'Another drink?'

'Thanks, but I really must go.'

A nice smell comes from the kitchen, and he sniffs it mechanically as he goes out. The nice smell follows him down the corridor, maybe even enters the Holsts' apartment under the door.

'He's an old idiot!' Frank says calmly.

3.

Frank had only come in so as not to wait in the street, but he didn't like these places. You went down two steps, and the floor had flagstones like in a church; there were old beams on the ceiling, wood panelling on the walls, a carved counter and very heavy tables.

He knew the owner, Mr Kamp, by sight and by name, and Mr Kamp probably knew him, too. He was a short, bald man, calm and polite, always wearing slippers. He must have been round once, but his belly was starting to grow flaccid; his trousers were getting to be loose on him. In places like his, which observe the rules, or at least pretend, with passing trade, to observe them, the best that is on offer is poor-quality beer.

It is easy to feel out of place. There are always four or five regulars at Kamp's, old men from the neighbourhood, who smoke their long porcelain or meerscham pipes and fall silent when you enter. All the time you stay there, they don't say a word, just puff patiently on their pipes and look at you.

Frank has new shoes with thick soles in genuine leather. His overcoat is warm, and any of these old people, with their families, could live for a month on what his fur-lined leather gloves cost.

Through the little windowpanes, he is watching for Holst to arrive. It is because of Holst that he came out, because he wants to look him in the face. Because the tram driver got back at midnight the previous night, and it was a Monday, he will leave home at about 2.30 today in order to be at his depot by three.

What were the old men talking about when he came in? He doesn't care. One of them is a cobbler and has a little shop a little further down the street, but due to the lack of raw materials, he does hardly any work these days. He must be eyeing Frank's shoes, sizing them up, indignant that the young man doesn't even bother to protect them with galoshes.

The fact is, there are places you can go and places it's better not to set foot in. At Timo's, he is at home. Not here. Here, what will they say about him when he has left?

Holst must have been another one who was big once but has grown thinner. They form a kind of race apart, and you recognize them as soon as you see them. Hamling, for example, is bulky, but with a perceptible hardness in his body. Holst, who is much taller, with shoulders that must have been broad, is now just slack. And it is not only his clothes that are worn and hang on him. It is his skin that has become too big and probably falls in folds. In fact, it already falls that way on his face.

Since the start of the events – he was barely fifteen at the time – Frank has felt contempt for poverty and for those who give in to it. Rather, it is a kind of revulsion, a disgust. Even for the girls who come to his mother's, who are too thin and too white, and who immediately throw themselves on the food! Some burst into tears, fill their plates and are then incapable of eating.

The street where the tram runs is white and black, and the snow is dirtier here than elsewhere. For as far as the eye can see, the shiny black rails emphasize the sense of perspective, forming curves where the two tracks join. The sky is low and too bright, with that brightness that is more depressing than true greyness. There is something threatening, definitive, eternal about that livid, translucent white; the colours become hard and nasty, the brown or dirty yellow of the buildings, for example, or the dark red of the tram, which seems to float as if wanting to mount the pavement. And opposite Kamp's café, an ugly queue stretches outside the door of the tripe butcher's, women in shawls, little girls with spindly legs who stamp their wooden soles to warm themselves.

‘How much?’

He pays. The cost is derisory. It is almost annoying to unbutton your coat for so little. In cafés like these, the prices are ridiculously low. Admittedly, you get only what you pay for.

Holst is at the kerb, quite grey in his long shapeless overcoat, his balaclava and his famous boots tied at the calves with string. In other times, in other countries, people would stop to look at him, dressed like that, with newspapers under his clothes no doubt to keep him warm, and that tin box he hugs for dear life under his arm. What can he possibly take with him to eat?

Frank joins him, as if he too were waiting for the tram. He comes and goes; ten times, he stands in front of Holst and looks him full in the face, blowing out cigarette smoke. If he threw his cigarette end on the ground, would Sissy's father pick it up? Maybe he has enough self-respect not to do it in front of him, although there are people in town who do it, people who are neither beggars or workers.

He has never seen Holst smoke. Did he smoke in the old days?

In his vexed state, Frank sees himself as an angry little dog trying in vain to attract attention. He turns round the long grey figure, and the man just stands there and doesn't even seem to notice his presence.

And yet the previous night, Holst saw him in the alley. He knows about the death of the sergeant. He also knows – and this is more than certain, because the caretaker has been drawing the tenants one by one into his lodge – that the violinist on the first floor has been arrested.

So why doesn't he react? Frank is almost tempted to say something to him, out of defiance. Maybe he would do so in the end, maybe he would say something, anything, if the dark-red tram didn't arrive, with its usual racket?

Frank won't get on. He has nothing to do in town at this hour. He simply wanted to see Holst, and he has had plenty of time to see him. Holst, who has gone and stood on the front platform, turns and leans out as the tram sets off, not to look at him, but to look at his building, his window, where the bright patch of a face is visible, framed by curtains.

Father and daughter are saying goodbye. Once the tram has gone, the girl remains at the window, because Frank is in the street. And Frank abruptly makes his mind up. Without lifting his head, he goes back inside the building, unhurriedly climbs the three floors and, with a slight tightness in his chest, knocks at the door just opposite Lotte's door.

He hasn't prepared anything, has no idea what he is going to say. All he has decided is that he will put his foot in the doorframe in order to stop the door closing, but in fact it doesn't close. Sissy looks at him in surprise, and he is almost as surprised as she is to be there. He smiles. It isn't something he does often. He tends rather to frown, to look straight ahead, harshly, even when he is all alone, or else to assume such an indifferent air that people are chilled by it.

'And yet,' Lotte says, 'when you smile, nobody can ever say no to you. You still have the same smile you had when you were two.'

He doesn't smile deliberately. He does it because he is embarrassed. He can't see Sissy very well, because she is against the light, but on a table by the window he notices little saucers, brushes, pots of paint.

He enters without saying anything, because he can't do otherwise. He says, with no more thought of apologizing or explaining his visit, 'Do you paint?'

'I decorate pottery. I have to help my father out.'

He has seen these supposedly artistic saucers, cups, ashtrays and candle holders in shops in the centre of town. It is mainly the occupiers who buy them, as souvenirs. They have flowers, or girls in peasant costumes, or the cathedral spire painted on them.

Why does she keep looking at him all the time? If she didn't look at him, his task would be easier. She can't take her eyes off him, but so innocently that it is embarrassing. It reminds him of the new girl who came this morning, who may well be busy at this hour; she, too, wouldn't stop looking at him with a kind of stupid respect.

'Do you work a lot?'

'The days are long,' she replies.

'Don't you ever go out?'

'Sometimes.'

'Do you ever go to the cinema?'

Why does she blush? He takes advantages of it immediately.

'I'd like to go to the cinema with you sometime.'

Not that she is the one who interests him the most, he realizes that now. He looks around, sniffing, just the way Hamling does when he comes to see them. The apartment is a lot smaller than Lotte's. The main door leads straight into the kitchen, where there is a folding bed pushed back against the wall. Presumably, it is her father who sleeps in it. His feet must stick out. Through an open door, he can see Sissy's bedroom – the proof of that is that she seems embarrassed when she sees him looking in that direction.

There is a fanlight, just like the one in their apartment, but this one has been blocked with cardboard, because it looks into a neighbour's apartment.

They are both still standing. She doesn't dare invite him to sit down. To hide his unease, he holds out his cigarette case.

'No, thanks. I never smoke.'

'Because you don't like it?'

There is a pipe on the table, an iron tin with cigarette ends. Does she imagine he doesn't understand?

'Try one. They're very mild.'

'I know.'

She has noticed the foreign brand. These cigarettes are more precious than banknotes, and everyone knows what a single one is worth.

She gives a start, because somebody has knocked at the door. Frank has had the same thought as her. Has Holst, for one reason or another, maybe because he saw Frank at the tram stop, come back home?

'Excuse me, Miss Holst . . .'

It is an old man Frank has already seen in the corridors, a neighbour, the very one whose apartment the fanlight looks into. Making little attempt at pretence, he looks at Frank as if he is a piece of filth a cat has dumped on the floor; conversely, he is very gentle, very paternal with Sissy.

'I came to ask if you have a match.'

'Yes, of course, Mr Wimmer.'

But he doesn't leave. He stays there, his hands on the stove, where there is still a little fire. 'We'll be having more snow before long,' he says casually.

'Yes, that's quite likely.'

'There are some people who aren't bothered by the cold!'

That's meant for Frank, but Sissy sides with him by winking at him.

Mr Wimmer is about sixty-five, and his face is covered in thick white hairs.

'We'll probably be having snow before the end of the week,' he repeats, waiting for Frank to go.

That encourages Frank to be bolder. 'Excuse me, Mr Wimmer . . .'

Until a few minutes ago, he didn't even know his name. The old man looks at him in shocked surprise.

'Miss Holst and I were just going out.'

Mr Wimmer looks at the girl, certain that she will contradict this.

'It's true,' she says, taking her coat off the hook. 'We have some shopping to do.'

This has been one of their best moments so far. They almost burst out laughing, both of them. They are just like two children playing a prank – and indeed Mr Wimmer, despite his lack of a tie and the brass collar stud over his Adam's apple, looks like a retired schoolteacher.

Sissy has adjusted the heat on the stove. She has gone back to get her gloves. The old man has not moved. It looks for a moment as if he is going to let them lock him in the apartment, as a protest. He watches them descend the stairs, and he must surely sense the youthful spring in their steps.

‘I wonder what he’ll tell my father.’

‘He won’t tell him.’

‘I know Daddy doesn’t like him, but—’

‘People never talk.’

He states this with confidence because it is true, because he knows it from experience. Has Holst informed on him? He would like to tell Sissy about that, to show her the revolver he still has in his pocket. He is risking his life, with that weapon on him, and she doesn’t even suspect.

‘What are we going to do?’ she asks, once they are out in the street.

It was a really extraordinary moment, one that was quite unexpected, when she answered the old man and took her coat, when they passed in front of the sour-faced old fellow and started walking down the stairs in the same way as they would have started dancing.

At that moment, she could quite naturally have taken his arm if she had wanted to. But now they are in the street, and it is already over. Does Sissy realize? They don’t know which direction to go. Fortunately, Frank has mentioned the cinema. He says, much too seriously, ‘There’s a good film on at the Lido.’

It is on the other side of the river. He doesn’t want to take the tram with her. Not because of her father, but because he wouldn’t know how to behave. They have to pass the old basin. On the bridge, the wind stops them from talking, and he doesn’t dare take her by the arm, even though she is instinctively holding herself right up against him.

‘We never go to the cinema.’

‘Why?’

He regrets his question. It is too expensive, obviously. And mentioning money suddenly embarrasses him. For example, he would like to buy her something at a pastry shop. There are still a few of them around, and when you’re known there, you can get whatever you want. He even knows a couple of places where you can dance, and he is sure Sissy would be happy to dance.

She has probably never been dancing. She is too young. Before the events, she was just a little girl. She has never drunk liqueurs or aperitifs.

He is the one who is embarrassed. In the upper town, he pushes her into the lobby of the Lido, where the electric lights are already on, producing a false daylight.

‘Two box seats.’

The words shock him. Because he comes here often. His friends do the same. When they are with girls, they get a box at the Lido, it’s well known. They are very dark, with walls high enough for you to do pretty much what you want. That’s how he several times ended up supplying girls to Lotte.

‘Do you work?’

‘The workshop closed last week.’

‘Would you like to earn some money?’

Sissy follows him like the others, excited to be entering the nice warm cinema, to be led to a box by a uniformed usherette wearing a little red cap with the word *Lido* in gold lettering.

That’s what puts him in a bad mood: she is just like the others! She is behaving just like the others. In the dark, she turns to him and smiles, because she is happy to be here, because she is grateful to him, and she says nothing, she barely quivers when he stretches his arm across the back of the seat.

In a little while, that arm will be round her shoulders. She has thin shoulders. She is waiting for him to kiss her, he is aware of that, and he does so almost regretfully. She doesn’t know how to kiss. She keeps her mouth half open, and it is quite wet, a little acidic. At the same time, she seizes his hand in hers and squeezes it very hard, then holds on to it as if it is her property now.

They are all the same! She believes in it. She silences him when he whispers in her ear, because she is trying to follow the film – they missed the beginning – and at times, her fingers tense because of what is happening on the screen.

‘Sissy.’

‘Yes.’

‘Look.’

‘At what?’

‘In my hand.’

It is the revolver, which gleams dimly in the semi-darkness. She shudders and looks about her.

‘Be careful!’

Although it has made an impression on her, she isn’t all that surprised.

‘Is it loaded?’

‘I think so.’

‘Have you ever used it?’

He hesitates. He is sincere.

‘Not yet.’

He takes advantage of the moment to put his hand on her knee and lift her dress imperceptibly.

She lets him, just like the others. He is seized with a dull anger, against her, against himself, against Holst. Yes, against Holst, too, though he would be hard pressed to say why!

‘Frank!’

She has just uttered his name. So she’s known it all along. She repeats it deliberately, just as she tries to push away his hand.

As far as he is concerned, the excitement has gone. Now he is just furious. Images dance, huge heads appear on the screen and disappear, black and white, voices, music. What he wants to know, what he will know, whatever she does, is whether or not she is a virgin, because he still has that to cling on to.

That obliges him to kiss her, and each time he kisses her, she softens a bit more, lets herself go; he gains ground on the bare thigh, where her hand weakly pushes his away as he follows the line of a suspender.

He will know. Because if she isn’t even a virgin, it is Holst who will lose everything, who will be made to look ridiculous. And so will Frank. What on earth possessed him to get involved with these two?

Her skin must be quite white, like Minna’s. Chicken skin, Lotte calls it. Chicken thighs. Is Minna stark naked in the bedroom right now, with a man she doesn’t know?

It’s warm. He advances. She doesn’t have the strength to keep resisting, and when she loses ground, her fingers gently squeeze Frank’s fingers, like a prayer.

She puts her mouth right up against his ear and stammers, ‘Frank . . .’

And in the way she utters that word, which he hasn’t needed to teach her, she has admitted defeat.

At the very least, he would have said a week, and yet he is already there; it is just a matter of centimetres now, the flesh is already smoother, warmer, damper.

Yes, she was a virgin. He stopped dead. But he didn't feel sorry for her. He wasn't moved.

She was just like the others!

He realized it wasn't her who interested him, but her father, and it was preposterous to be thinking about Holst when he had his hand where it was.

'You hurt me.'

'I'm sorry,' he said politely.

And abruptly he again became proper. In the darkness, Sissy's face must be expressing disappointment. If she had been able to see him, it would have been worse. When he was proper, he became terrible, so calm, cold and absent that it was impossible to know what to make of him. Even Lotte was scared of him at times like that.

'Lose your temper!' she would say in exasperation. 'Scream, hit out, do something, anything!'

Too bad for Sissy. He wasn't interested in her any more. Several times lately, thinking about her, he had thought about couples walking in the street, hips joined, endless hot kisses in corners. He had genuinely believed it might be exciting. One detail, among others, had always appealed to him: the steam rising from the lips of two people when they come together for a kiss by the light of a streetlamp.

Mingling your steam with someone else's!

'How about a bite to eat?'

All she could do now was follow him. Besides, she would be only too happy to eat cakes.

'Let's go to Taste's.'

'They say it's full of officers.'

'What of it?'

She had to get used to the idea that he wasn't just any young man, some cousin you passed love notes to. He didn't even let her see the end of the film. He dragged her out. And when they passed lighted shop windows, he saw that she was watching him surreptitiously, with a curiosity that was already mixed with respect.

'It's expensive,' she ventured this time.

'What of it?'

‘I’m not dressed for a place like that.’

He was used to that, too: those coats that were too short, too narrow, to which you added your mother’s or grandmother’s fur to make a collar. She would meet others like her at Taste’s. He could have told her that this is how all the girls are dressed when they go there for the first time.

‘Frank . . .’

It is one of the few doors still surrounded by neon lights, of a very soft blue. There is a thick carpet in the dimly lit corridor, but here, the absence of light isn’t poverty; on the contrary, it is there to give an impression of luxury, and the liveried doorman is as well dressed as a general.

‘Go in.’

They climb the stairs to the first floor. There is a gleaming brass rod on each step, and electric wall lights imitating candles. Between mysterious drapes, a young woman holds her hand out to take Sissy’s coat off her.

‘Do I have to?’ Sissy asks, in a resigned tone.

Just like the others! Frank is at home. He smiles at the cloakroom girl, hands her his coat and stops in front of a mirror to comb his hair.

In her little knitted black dress, Sissy looks like an orphan. He pulls back one of the drapes, revealing a warm, scented room where soft music is playing and the women’s complexions glisten as much as the stripes on the uniforms.

For a moment, she wants to cry, and he notices.

What of it?

It is very late, 10.30, by the time Kromer gets to Timo’s. Frank has been waiting for him for more than an hour. Kromer has been drinking, that’s immediately obvious from his taut skin, his overly shiny eyes, the abruptness of his movements. He almost knocks over his chair as he sits down. His cigar smells good. It is an even better cigar than the ones he usually smokes, although he always chooses the best available.

‘I’ve just had dinner with the general who’s in charge,’ he says under his breath.

After which he falls silent, in order to let the significance of his words sink in.

‘I’ve brought you back your knife.’

‘Thanks.’ He takes it without looking at it and stuffs it in his pocket. He is too preoccupied with himself to think much about Frank, but all the same,

remembering what they were talking about yesterday, he asks out of politeness:

‘Did you use it?’

When Frank went back to Timo’s the previous night after his kill, it was in order to show Kromer the revolver he had got hold of. He has shown it to Sissy. There are a lot of people he could show it to, and yet, without quite knowing why, he replies:

‘I haven’t had the opportunity.’

‘Maybe it’s for the best . . . By the way, you don’t know where I could find any watches, do you?’

Whatever he talks about, Kromer always gives the impression he is dealing with important, mysterious business. It is the same with his contacts, the people he has dinner with, the people he drinks with. He rarely mentions names. ‘Someone high up,’ he’ll whisper. ‘I mean, really high up.’

‘What kind of watches?’ Frank asks.

‘Old watches, as many as possible. Lots of them. Know what I mean?’

Frank drinks a lot, too. Everyone drinks. First of all, for the good reason that they spend most of their time in places like Timo’s. Secondly, because good-quality drinks are rare, hard to find, and ridiculously expensive.

Unlike most people who drink, Frank doesn’t sweat, doesn’t talk loudly, doesn’t wave his arms about. On the contrary, his complexion grows paler, duller, his features sharper, his lips so thin that they are nothing but a pen line in his face. His eyes become quite small, with a cold, hard flame, as if he has started to hate the human race.

Maybe he has.

He doesn’t like Kromer. Kromer doesn’t like him either. Kromer, who puts on such a friendly, easy-going air, doesn’t actually like anyone, but he is happy to cajole the people who admire him; there are always lots of things in his pockets – amazing cigars, cigarette lighters, ties, silk handkerchiefs – that he casually holds out to you when you are least expecting it.

‘Here, take this!’

Frank would rather trust Timo than him. And he has noticed that Timo doesn’t trust Kromer very much either.

He traffics on the black market, obviously. There are deals you know about, that he tells you about in detail, because he needs you, and then he

gives you a decent share of the profits. He rubs shoulders a lot with the occupiers. That's something else that brings in money.

How far does he go exactly? How far would he be capable of going, if need be, if his self-interest was at stake?

Frank definitely won't tell him about the revolver. He prefers to take up the subject of the watches, because the word has brought back memories.

'It's for the guy I just told you about actually, the general. You know what he used to do, just ten years ago? He worked in a factory making lamps. He's forty years old and he's a general. The two of us got through four bottles of champagne between us. The first thing he talked about was his watches. He collects them. He's crazy about them. He claims he has several hundred.

"In a town like this," he said to me, "where so many well-off types used to live, high-ranking officials, people with private incomes, it should be possible to find lots of old watches. You know what I mean: gold or silver watches that have one or more lids. Some strike the hour. There are even some with little figures that move . . ."

While Kromer is talking, Frank remembers old Vilmos' watches, he remembers old Vilmos himself, in that room that was always half dark, with just a few rays of sunshine passing between the slats of the blinds, winding the watches one by one, lifting them to his ear, making them strike, activating tiny automata.

'We could make a packet, don't you see?' Kromer says with a sigh. 'Given his position . . . It's his hobby. He can't get enough. He read somewhere that the king of Egypt has the finest collection of watches in the world and he'd love it if his country declared war on Egypt.'

'Fifty-fifty?' Frank asks coldly.

'You know where to get hold of watches?'

'Fifty-fifty?'

'Have I ever tried to cheat you?'

'No. Only, I'd need a car.'

'That's not so easy. I could ask the general for one, but I wonder if it's wise.'

'No. A civilian car. Just for two or three hours.'

Kromer doesn't insist on details. Deep down, he is a lot more cautious than he likes to appear. If Frank tells him he can get him watches, he prefers not to know where they come from, or how he plans to get hold of them.

He is intrigued, all the same. What intrigues him above all is Frank himself, his way of making a decision, quite calmly.

‘Why don’t you just steal a car in the street?’

That’s the simplest way, obviously, and at night, for the thirty kilometres maximum that he will have to go, there is not much of a risk. But Frank doesn’t want to admit that he can’t drive.

‘Find me a car, with someone I can trust, and I’m pretty certain I can get you the watches.’

‘What did you do today?’

‘I went to the cinema.’

‘With a girl?’

‘As usual.’

‘Did you touch her up?’

Kromer is a lecher. He is always chasing after girls, especially if they are poor, because it is easier, and he prefers them very young. He loves to talk about it. His nostrils flare, he smacks his lips. He uses the crudest words and seeks out the most intimate details.

‘Do I know her?’

‘No.’

‘Will you introduce me?’

‘Maybe. She’s a virgin.’

Kromer squirms on his chair and wets the end of his cigar. ‘Do you want her for yourself?’

‘No.’

‘Then pass her on to me.’

‘I’ll see.’

‘Is she young?’

‘She’s sixteen. She lives with her father. You just think about the car.’

‘I’ll let you know tomorrow. Come to Leonard’s about five.’

It is another bar they go to, in the upper town, but because of the location Leonard is forced to close at ten in the evening.

‘Tell me what the two of you did at the cinema . . . Timo! A bottle, old man. Now tell me . . .’

‘Same as usual . . . her stocking, her suspender, then . . .’

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing.’

He will go home. There is a good chance his mother has kept Minna. She doesn't really like letting them go in the first few days, because there are some who don't come back.

He will sleep with her, and, when all is said and done, it will be exactly as if it was Sissy. In the dark, he won't be able to tell the difference.

4.

He is walking, his hands in his pockets, the collar of his coat turned up, a small cloud of steam in front of his mouth, along the best-lit street in town, although even here there are large patches of darkness. The appointment is in half an hour.

It is Thursday. It was Tuesday when Kromer talked to him about the watches. On Wednesday, when Frank joined him at Leonard's at five, Kromer asked, 'Are we still on?'

Some older people must find it odd to see them, young as they are, conversing so solemnly. But God knows, they certainly have important things to discuss! Frank sees himself in a mirror in the café, calm and blond in his well-tailored coat.

'Do you have the car?'

'I can introduce you to the driver in five minutes. He is waiting opposite.'

A noisier, more vulgar establishment, though still one where it is possible to get a decent drink. A man gets to his feet. He is twenty-three or twenty-four, very thin, and in spite of his leather jacket he looks like a student.

'This is him,' Kromer says, indicating Frank. And to Frank: 'Carl Adler. You can trust him. He's an ace.'

They have a drink, because you always have to have a drink.

'And the other guy?' Frank asks in a low voice.

'Oh, yes. Will he have to . . .?' He hesitates. He doesn't like talking openly, and there are words it is best not to utter, words that some have superstitiously erased from their vocabulary. 'Will he have to do any rough stuff?'

'It's unlikely.'

Kromer, who knows everybody, looks around him, chooses a face through the smoke and rushes outside for a moment, taking someone with him. When he returns, he is accompanied by a young man with coarse features, clearly working class. Frank doesn't catch his name.

‘What time do you think you’ll have finished by? He has to be back at his mother’s by ten. Any later than that, the caretaker won’t open the door, and his mother, who’s sick, often needs him during the night.’

Frank almost gave up his plan, not because of this second man, but because of the first, Adler, who hadn’t opened his mouth while they were sitting together waiting. He is not sure, but he could swear he has met him with the violinist from the first floor. Where, he doesn’t know. It may just be an association of ideas, but it is enough to bother him.

‘When do we go?’

‘As soon as possible.’

‘Tomorrow? You choose the time.’

‘Eight in the evening. Here.’

‘Not here,’ Adler cuts in. ‘My car will be parked in the street behind, just opposite the fishmonger’s. You just have to get in.’

But when they are alone, Frank asks Kromer, ‘Can they be trusted?’

‘Have I ever introduced you to anyone who couldn’t?’

‘What does this Adler do?’

A vague gesture. ‘Don’t worry.’

It is curious. A person can be suspicious and trusting at the same time. That may have to do with the fact that everyone has something on everyone else, that everyone, on closer view, has something to feel guilty about. In other words, the only reason you don’t betray other people is for fear of being betrayed by them.

‘What about the girl? Have you given it any thought?’

Frank doesn’t reply. He doesn’t tell him that that day, Wednesday – it was on Tuesday that he went to the cinema with her – he had seen Sissy again. Not for long. Not immediately after Holst left, although he watched him from the window as he walked to the tram stop.

He waited until four. In the end he shrugged and said to himself:

‘We’ll see!’

He knocked at the door, as if he was just passing. He had no intention of going in, because of the old fool lying in wait behind his fanlight. He simply said, ‘I’ll wait for you downstairs. Are you coming?’

He didn’t have long to wait before she came down. She ran the last few metres of pavement, with a mechanical glance at the windows of the building, then, doubtless just as mechanically, hooked her hand through his arm.

‘Mr Wimmer hasn’t said anything to my father,’ she immediately announced.

‘I was sure of it.’

‘I won’t be able to stay for a long time today.’

They can never stay for a long time on the second day.

It was just starting to get dark. He pulled her into the alley. It was she who held her lips up to him, she who asked:

‘Did you think about me, Frank?’

He didn’t grope her. He just slipped his hand inside her blouse for a moment, because the previous day, at the Lido, he hadn’t thought about her breasts and he had no idea what they were like. The thought had occurred to him at night in bed with Minna, who is almost flat-chested.

Is that why he knocked at Sissy’s door and asked her to come downstairs? Was it just curiosity?

He saw her again today, at the same hour; and today he was the one who announced, ‘I’m only free for a few minutes.’

She didn’t dare ask him any questions, however much she may have wanted to. ‘Do you think I’m ugly, Frank?’ she murmured with a pout.

They all ask that, even though he would be hard put to say if he thinks a girl is ugly or not.

Never mind! He makes no promises to Kromer, but he doesn’t say no either. They’ll see. Minna claims to be in love with him, says that now she knows him, she is ashamed of what she is forced to do with the clients. She had no luck with the first. More complications! Frank had to try his best to calm her down. What’s more, she is afraid for him. She has seen the revolver, and it terrifies her.

Today, he had to promise her that he will wake her when he gets back, no matter how late it is.

‘I won’t be asleep anyway,’ she asserted.

She already smells like the other girls. That must have something to do with the beauty treatments Lotte makes them use, the soap she gives them. The transformation is rapid, in any case. All morning, she roamed the apartment in a black lace nightie.

He vowed he would keep the appointment with Adler and the other man without seeing Kromer again, but at the last moment he loses his nerve. Not so much because of Kromer as because he needs to cling on to something stable, something known. The crowd in the street always scares him a little.

By the light of the shop windows or the streetlamps, you see people passing with faces that are too pale, with drawn features and eyes that have absent or wild expressions. Most are secretive. The worst are those with dead eyes; there are more and more people with dead eyes.

Like Holst? It isn't quite the same thing. There is no hatred in Holst's eyes, and they aren't empty; nevertheless, they give the feeling that there is no contact possible with them, and that is humiliating.

He pushes open the door and walks into Leonard's. Kromer is there, with a man who is nothing like either of them, Ressler, the editor of the evening paper, who is always accompanied by a bodyguard with a broken nose.

'Do you know Peter Ressler?'

'I know his name, like everyone.'

'My friend Frank.'

'Pleased to meet you.'

He holds out a long, bony and very white hand. Now he comes to think of it, it might have been the hands of Carl Adler, this evening's driver, that made Frank raise an eyebrow, because they are just like these.

The Ressler family is one of the oldest in the town, and his father was a state councillor. Even before the war, they were ruined, but it is in their town-house that the occupiers have established their headquarters; not a month goes by without some work being done on it for those gentlemen.

The story goes that Councillor Ressler, often seen hugging the buildings like a ghost, has never said a word to them, and that in his place, anyone else would have been hanged or shot by now.

Peter, who is a lawyer and used to be involved in the film business, immediately accepted the post of editor of the evening newspaper. He is probably the only person in the entire country who is allowed to travel abroad, for mysterious reasons. He has been to Rome, Paris, London. The dark suit he is wearing this evening comes from London, and he conspicuously smokes English cigarettes.

He is a nervous, sickly young man. Some say he takes drugs, others that he is homosexual.

'I thought you had an important appointment,' Kromer says, very proud to be seen with Ressler, but a little worried to see Frank here at this hour.

'What are you drinking?'

'I was passing, so I thought I'd say hello.'

'Go on, have a drink. Barman!'

A few minutes later, when Frank leaves, Kromer takes something from his pocket and slips it into Frank's.

'You never know . . .'

It is a flask containing alcohol.

'Good luck. Don't forget about the girl . . .'

They have hardly spoken. The car turned out to be a van. Carl Adler was waiting in the driver's seat, his foot on the starter.

'And the other guy?' Frank asked.

'Behind.'

In the darkness of the van, he saw the reddish circle of a cigarette.

'Which way?'

'Just keep driving across town.'

They cling in passing to familiar landmarks. They even pass the Lido cinema, and for a moment Frank thinks of Sissy, busy right now painting flowers by the light of the lamp as she waits for her father to come home.

The guy in the back is really common, Frank realized that the day before. The skin of his broad hands is deeply encrusted with black, and if his face was properly washed, it would look like Kromer's, only more open and direct. He doesn't seem nervous at all. Even though he has no idea what they are going to do, he doesn't ask any questions.

Nor does Carl Adler. But he has an unpleasant way of looking straight ahead, presenting to Frank a profile that is too deliberately indifferent, a scornful or at any rate superior expression.

'What now?'

'Turn left.'

As no car can circulate without a pass from the occupiers, who can be very difficult about it, it must mean that Adler works with them. There are lots of people who play a double game. One man was seen every day in the company of high-ranking officers and was so well-known that children spat on the pavement when he passed. Then he was shot, and now they say he was a hero.

'Turn left again at the next crossroads.'

Frank smokes cigarettes and passes them to the man behind, who must be sitting on the spare tyre. Carl Adler has already said he doesn't smoke. Too bad for him.

'When you see a pylon, turn right and climb the slope.'

They are already nearing the village, and Frank could find his way with his eyes closed. He would say 'his' village if there was anything that was really his in the world. It was here that he was brought up, here that Lotte, when she had him at the age of nineteen, left him in the care of a nurse.

There is a fairly steep slope, and the houses at the bottom are almost all small farms. Then the road widens to form a kind of main square, with round cobbles on which cars bounce. The church is beyond the lake, which in reality is nothing but a large pond, along with the cemetery, where the grave-digger – is it still old Pruster? – only has to push his spade less than a metre down to strike water.

'I don't bury them, I drown them!' he says when he has had a few drinks.

The headlights illumine a pink house with life-size painted angels on its gable. The whole village is painted like a toy. There are pink, green, blue and yellow houses. Almost every one has a little niche with a porcelain virgin, and there is a festival during the year at which candles are lit in front of all these statuettes.

Frank isn't nervous. He made up his mind, when Kromer talked to him about watches, that it wouldn't affect him.

On the contrary, it's an opportunity! He doesn't owe these people anything, he doesn't owe anybody anything. It is all too easy to give sweets to a child and talk to him in a silly little voice.

He lived here until he was ten, and his mother came to see him almost every Sunday, at least in the summer – he remembers her white straw hats. There wasn't a more beautiful woman in all the world. Whenever she came, the nurse would cross her red hands over her belly and go into raptures.

Lotte didn't always come alone. Four or five times, there was a man with her – a different man each time. They always seemed diffident, and she would look at them anxiously and say with forced gaiety:

'And this is my Frank!'

For one reason or another, it never seemed to work out. By the time she put him in school, in town, as a boarder, Frank had got the picture and begged her to stop coming to the visiting room, even though she always came bearing gifts.

'But why?'

'No reason.'

'Have your classmates said something?'

'No.'

She wanted to make him into a doctor or lawyer. It was her obsession. Fortunately, the war came, and the schools were closed for several months. By the time they reopened, he was over fifteen.

‘I’m not going back to school,’ he declared.

‘Why, Frank?’

‘Because!’

He has never known if he reminds her of someone, but even when he was very young, he noticed that when he looked at her in a certain way, his mother wouldn’t insist, seemed scared, did whatever he wanted.

His ‘closed’ look, she calls it.

Ever since, life has been so complicated for everyone that Lotte hasn’t bothered any more with his education. They’ve got into the habit of saying, ‘Later, when it’s all over.’

But it isn’t over. And now he is a man. Not so long ago, in an argument in the course of which he was the calmer of the two, he narrowed his eyes and said coldly to Lotte:

‘You whore!’

Now, he orders Adler, just as calmly:

‘Stop!’

Just before the square. There is a street on the right where the van won’t be noticed. Besides, there is nobody outside. There are hardly any lighted windows, because the villagers keep their shutters well closed; there is barely a sign of life. The windows of the school are dark too, five windows, so many of whose panes he smashed with his ball.

‘Are you coming?’ he says to the man behind.

‘Call me Stan,’ the man replies, in his vulgar, friendly way, then slaps his empty pockets and adds, ‘Your pal told me not to bring anything. Is that right?’

Frank has his revolver, which is enough. Adler will wait for them in the car.

‘Are you sure?’ he asks, trying to see his eyes.

‘That’s what I’m here for!’ Adler says condescendingly, almost with disgust.

The snow crunches more here than in town. There are gardens behind the houses, fir trees, hedges bristling with ice. The Vilmos house is on the right, set back a little from the square.

There is no light visible, but the rooms where people congregate are at the back.

‘Just let me get on with it.’

‘All right.’

‘We may need to frighten them.’

‘Sure.’

‘Maybe even rough them up a little.’

‘Right!’

He hasn’t been back here in years, but it is impossible for for him not to follow in his old footsteps. The watchmaker Vilmos and his watches, and his famous garden, may be what remains most vividly from his childhood.

Even before getting to the door, he has the impression he recognizes the smell of the house, a house that has always been a house of old people, because Vilmos and his sister have always been ageless.

Frank takes a dark scarf from his pocket and ties it around his face, under his eyes. Stan is about to object.

‘It’s not the same for you. They don’t know you. But if you like . . .’

He hands him an identical scarf: he has thought of everything.

He can still remember Miss Vilmos’ cakes, cakes such as he has never eaten anywhere else, sickly sweet, thick, with designs in pink or blue icing. She used to keep them in a tin with coloured illustrations of the adventures of Robinson Crusoe on it.

And she had the habit of calling him ‘My cherub’.

Vilmos must be at least eighty, his sister about seventy-five. He finds it hard to be quite sure, because when you are little you have a different idea of people’s ages. As far as he is concerned, they have always been old, and Vilmos is the first person in the world to have revealed to him that you can remove all your teeth from your mouth in one go, because he wore dentures.

They are stingy. The brother and the sister are both as stingy as each other.

‘Shall I ring the bell?’ Stan asks, impressed to be standing here in a deserted square in the moonlight.

Frank rings himself, surprised to find the bell-pull so low when in the old days he had to stand on tiptoe to reach it. He is holding his revolver in his right hand. His foot is ready to stop the door closing again, like the time he first went to Sissy’s. Footsteps come from a long way away, like in church.

That's another memory. The long, wide corridor, with dark walls and doors as mysterious as sacristy doors, has a floor of grey flagstones, and two or three of them are always loose.

'Who's there?'

It is the voice of Miss Vilmos, who isn't scared of anything.

'The priest sent me,' he replies.

He hears her take off the chain and pushes his foot forwards, his revolver held close to his stomach.

He says to Stan, who suddenly appears quite gauche:

'Go in!'

Then, to the old woman:

'Where's Vilmos?'

My God, how small she is! And such white hair! She puts her hands together and stammers in a cracked voice, 'But, my good sir, you know perfectly well he's been dead for a year.'

'Give me the watches.'

He recognizes the corridor, the dark-brown imitation cordovan wallpaper on which the wisps of gold are still visible. The shop is on the left, with the workbench over which Vilmos would always be bent, a magnifying glass ringed with black wedged in his eye socket.

'Where are the watches?' he asks, adding, more nervously, 'The collection . . .'

Then, pulling out the revolver:

'It's best for you if you hurry up about it.'

Is he on the verge of failure? It has never occurred to him that Vilmos might be dead. With him, it would have been easy. The watchmaker was so timorous, he would have given up his watches immediately.

The old vixen is made of sterner stuff. She has seen the revolver, but it is clear she is looking for a way out, that she is not in any mood to give up, that she will keep fighting while she thinks she still has a chance.

All at once Stan – Frank has forgotten about him – pipes up in his guttural voice:

'Maybe we could help her recover her memory?'

He must be used to it. Kromer didn't choose a beginner. Maybe he did it deliberately, because he didn't really trust Frank?

The old woman has her back up against the wall. A meagre yellow lock hangs down over her face. Her arms are stretched out, and her hands are flat

on the fake cordovan.

‘The watches . . .’ Frank repeats almost mechanically.

He hasn’t drunk much, and yet it is all happening the way it does when you are drunk . . . Everything is vague and blurred, with only a few details standing out with exaggerated clarity: the yellowish-grey lock of hair, the hands flat on the wall, the thick blue veins on those old hands . . .

He is always so calm, and yet he must have turned too abruptly to confer with Stan, because the scarf has come loose. Before he can pick it up and turn his face away, she has recognized him.

‘Frank!’ she cries, adding immediately – how stupid it sounds – ‘Little Frank!’

‘The watches!’ he repeats harshly.

‘I know you’ll find them in the end anyway. You always managed to get what you wanted. But don’t hurt me. I’ll tell you . . . My God! Frank! It’s little Frank!’

She is relieved and at the same time more scared than before. She has lost her inertia. There is a sense of her mind beginning to work again. She sets off at a trot towards the end of the corridor, towards the kitchen, where he can see a wicker armchair with a big ginger cat lying curled up on a red cushion.

She seems to be talking to herself, or maybe reciting prayers, as she moves her bony limbs in her ample clothes.

Maybe she is only playing for time? She throws Stan the occasional sidelong glance, no doubt wondering if he might be easier to soften up.

‘What on earth are you planning to do with them? . . . When I think that my poor brother was so happy to show them to you, that he held them up to your ear, one by one, so that you could hear them strike, and that I always had sweets for you . . . Look, the tin’s still on the mantelpiece, but it’s empty . . . You can’t find sweets these days . . . You can’t find anything . . .’

She is crying. In her way, but she is crying, and it’s quite possible it’s another ploy.

‘The watches!’

‘He’s moved them around so much, with all these events . . . He died a year ago, and you didn’t even know! . . . Nobody knows anything any more . . . If he was here, I’m sure . . .’

What is she sure of? It’s absurd. Time to get it over and done with. Adler must be getting impatient, and he would be quite capable of leaving without

them.

‘Where are the watches?’

She still summons the energy to shift a log in the fireplace, and he senses that she is deliberately turning her back on him as she says angrily, ‘Under the flagstone.’

‘Which flagstone?’

‘*You know perfectly well!* The one that’s cracked. The third one.’

While Frank goes looking for a tool to prise up the flagstone in the corridor, Stan stays in the kitchen to keep an eye on the old lady. She offers him a coffee. Frank overhears her say to him, ‘He came to see us almost every day, and I always had cakes for him in that tin.’ Then she adds in a low voice, as if she wasn’t speaking to a man with the lower part of his face hidden by a scarf, ‘My God, sir, he can’t have become a thief, can he? And he’s armed! Is his revolver loaded?’

Frank has found the watches, with their cases, protected by several layers of sackcloth. ‘Stan!’ he calls in a sharp voice.

All they have to do now is leave. It’s over. Stupidly, the old woman stammers:

‘Do you think he’d like a cup of coffee?’

‘Stan!’

She clings to them, follows them into the corridor.

‘Now we’ve seen it all, Lord! To think I . . .’

All they have to do is go outside and get back to the car that is waiting for them 200 metres away. Even if she was capable of shouting loudly enough to alert the neighbours, it wouldn’t matter, because none of the cars in the village has any petrol, and the telephone doesn’t work at night.

He has half opened the door, seen the square bathed in moonlight, without a trace of life. ‘Go,’ he says to his companion.

And the other man knows what that means. The old woman has seen Frank with his face uncovered. She knows him. There are times when you can count on the protection of the occupiers. At other times, they drop you, you don’t know why, and the police are only too happy to take advantage. However well you think you know them, their behaviour is always a bit of a mystery.

You can never be sure of them.

Stan takes a few steps outside, holding the sack containing the watches at arm’s length. The hardened snow can be heard crunching.

The door has closed behind him. He is sure he heard a muffled shot. Then the door opens again, and he sees a rectangle of yellowish light, which gets thinner and thinner until it disappears completely.

Footsteps join his. In the shadows, a hand takes the sack from him.

Then, just before they get to the car, taking advantage of the fact that there are only the two of them, Stan says:

‘An old maid!’

There is no response. In the car, Frank holds out the packet of cigarettes behind him without turning, then lights his own cigarette and orders curtly:

‘To town!’

There is a bad moment for him to get through, although he knows it won’t last long. It has only taken hold of him since he has been back in the car. Up until that point, he has been in control of his nerves.

They have given way all at once. Only a little. The others won’t notice a thing. It’s a kind of quiver, a spasm inside him. He has to make an effort to stop his hands from shaking, and there is something like an air bubble trying to escape from his chest.

He lowers the car window. The icy air on his forehead does him good. He breathes it in greedily.

Just seeing the lights as they approach town starts to calm him. And he hasn’t touched the flask of alcohol Kromer stuffed in his pocket.

It’s almost over. It’s purely physical. He felt pretty much the same thing with the sergeant, though it was less strong that time.

He’s pleased. He had to get through this once and for all, and now it’s done. With the Eunuch, it didn’t count. It didn’t mean anything. In a way, that was just a matter of technique.

The strange thing is that now he has done something he was feeling the need to do for a long time.

‘Where shall I drop you?’

Does Adler suspect what happened? He probably didn’t hear the shot. He hasn’t asked any questions. He simply pushed away the sack, which would have got in the way of his driving and is now between their feet.

Frank is about to say, ‘My place.’ Then his mistrust gains the upper hand:

‘Timo’s. Not too close, though.’

He thinks again and decides not to go straight to Timo’s. There is no point handing the watches over to Kromer immediately. The loot will be safer in the house at the back, where the girls lodge.

Before they reach town, he plunges his arm in the sack, feels the cases, because there are some that he recognizes, takes one out and slips it in his pocket.

He feels perfectly fine. He's looking forward to seeing Kromer. He's looking forward to having a drink.

The car barely stops and leaves again without him. He walks along the street and enters the room of one of the hostesses. She isn't in, but he'll see her at Timo's. He stuffs the revolver, which he hasn't had time to clean, into the sack, then slides the sack itself under the bed.

The moment is almost a solemn one. He recognizes the lights, the faces, the smell of wine and spirits, Timo gesturing to him with his hand from the counter.

He walks slowly, small and squat in his overcoat, his features quite relaxed, a slight gleam in his eyes. Kromer isn't alone. He's never alone. Frank knows his two companions and has no desire to talk to them right now.

He leans over Kromer. 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

They go to the toilets at the back. There, without a word, Frank puts the case in his companion's hand. He didn't get it wrong, even though it was dark in the car. It is the big blue case containing a watch with a porcelain face, with a shepherd and shepherdess carved on it.

'Only one?'

'I got about fifty, but you have to talk to him first, to know what we're doing.'

Has it left any mark on him? Already, in the car, on the ride back, Adler avoided turning towards him, and not once did their shoulders brush against each other.

But Kromer is different. He is embarrassed. He doesn't dare ask questions, and he keeps looking away, his gaze only returning to Frank in short, surreptitious bursts.

The other times they did business, he was the boss, and he made sure Frank knew it.

Now he doesn't argue. He is in a hurry to return to the bar.

'I'll try to see him tomorrow,' he says meekly, then, as he is sitting back down at the table:

'Are you having a drink?'

Frank has forgotten to give him back the flask he didn't use. Now he looks him full in the face as he hands it to him.

Does Kromer understand?

Then he goes home, joins Minna in her bed and makes love to her so violently that she is frightened.

She understands, too. They all understand!

5.

He spent all day in the kitchen, unshaven, unwashed, his feet in the stove, reading a cheap edition of Zola. Does his mother have her suspicions? Usually, when it gets to midday, she urges him to wash and dress, because there is only one bathroom, and they need it in the afternoon for the girls and the clients.

But this time she didn't say anything. She must have heard the noise he and Minna had made last night, and Minna was looking haggard and anxious; she spent her time either at the window, as if expecting to see the police show up, or staring into his eyes, disappointed that he seemed concerned only about the cold he thinks he has caught.

As for him, he stuffed himself full of aspirins, put drops in his nose and plunged stubbornly back into his reading.

Sissy must have waited for him. Several times, especially after Holst left, Frank looked at the alarm-clock above the stove but didn't move. There were the usual comings and goings in the apartment, voices behind the doors, noises he knew well. Not once was he curious enough to climb on the table and look through the fanlight. Minna came in once to get a kettle of hot water, stark naked and wild-eyed, her hand on her lower abdomen, and even she didn't grab his attention.

All the same, he got dressed in the end, once night had fallen. He passed the Holsts' door. He could have sworn that the door moved slightly, that Sissy was behind it, ready to open, but he continued calmly on his way, smoking his cigarette, which tasted of menthol.

Kromer didn't get to Leonard's until after seven. He was trying to hide his excitement.

'I've spoken to the general.'

Frank didn't react.

Kromer quoted a large figure. 'Half for you, half for me, and I'll take care of the other two.'

Kromer is already trying to behave with him the way he used to, as if he is a very busy and important man.

Frank puts his foot down. 'I want sixty per cent.'

'All right.'

Kromer must be thinking he will con him all the same, since Frank won't see the general and won't know what he paid.

'Or rather, no. Fifty, as we agreed. But I want a green card.'

Kromer doesn't have one. The reason Frank said it is probably because it is the hardest thing to obtain. It is rare to get more than a glimpse of these cards. A man like Ressler must have one, but he takes care not to show it. There is a whole hierarchy of permits: passes for cars, then those that allow free movement at night, then those that allow the bearer to enter certain areas.

The green card, with a photograph and fingerprints, signatures of the commander of the armed forces and the chief of the political police, charges all the authorities to leave the bearer free to 'carry out his mission'.

In other words, nobody has the right to search you. At the sight of a green card, the patrols salute you and apologize profusely, looking vaguely worried.

The most surprising thing is that Frank had never thought about it before his conversation with Kromer. The idea occurred to him all of a sudden as they were discussing the percentage, and he was wondering what he could demand that was exorbitant.

And the strange thing is that Kromer, after a moment's astonishment, doesn't burst out laughing, doesn't launch into objections.

'I can always mention it.'

'Well, it's up to your general: take it or leave it. If he really wants the watches, he'll know what he has to do.'

He will have his green card, he is sure of it.

'What about the girl?'

'Nothing new. It's all OK.'

'Have you touched her yet?'

'No.'

'Will you leave her to me?'

'Maybe.'

'I hope she's not too skinny. Is she clean?'

Why is Frank now almost certain that the story of the strangled girl in the barn is pure invention? He doesn't care. He despises Kromer. And it's amusing to think that a man like Kromer is going to go to great lengths to get him a green card he wouldn't dare ask for himself.

'By the way, who is this Carl Adler fellow?'

'The driver? I think he's a wireless engineer.'

'What does he do?'

'He works with them, locating clandestine radios. He's a trustworthy guy.'

'Oh, really?'

Kromer keeps coming back to his obsession:

'Why do you never bring her?'

'Who?'

'The girl.'

'I already told you, she lives with her father.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'We'll see. Maybe I'll work something out.'

People must imagine he's hard. Even his mother is scared of him. And yet he can suddenly go all dreamy, like now, looking at a green patch with real tenderness. It's nothing, just the bottom of a decorative panel at Leonard's. It depicts a meadow, and each blade of grass is distinct, each petal on the daisies.

'What are you thinking about?'

'I'm not thinking.'

It's a question his nurse used to ask him, or that his mother would ask him whenever she came to see him on Sundays.

'What are you thinking about, little Frank?'

'Nothing.'

He would always answer moodily, because he didn't like being called 'little Frank'.

'Hey! If I get you your green card—'

'You will.'

'All right. Let's assume I do. We'll be able to do some interesting things, won't we?'

'Maybe.'

This evening, he knows his mother has understood. He got back early, because he really is starting a cold and he has always been afraid of illness.

The women were all in the front room, the one they call the salon. There was big Bertha darning stockings, Minna with a hot-water bottle on her belly and Lotte reading the paper.

The three of them were still, so still and silent in the sleeping building that they could have been a painting; it was a surprise to see them open their mouths.

‘Back already?’

The paper must have mentioned what happened to Miss Vilmos. Nobody makes a fuss about these things the way they used to, because there are attacks like this every day. But even if there were only three lines on the last page, Lotte wouldn’t miss them; she never misses an item about people she has known.

She must have realized part of the truth and guessed the rest. She probably even remembered the noise he made last night with Minna, and she knows men so well that such details have a specific meaning for her.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you like a cup of coffee?’

‘No, thanks.’

She is afraid of him. She tiptoes anxiously around him. When it comes down to it, it has always been that way, although less blatant, less acknowledged, so to speak.

‘You’re sniffing.’

‘I’ve caught a cold.’

‘Why don’t you have a hot toddy and let us put cupping glasses on you?’

He would be happy with the toddy, but not the cupping glasses. He hates those pockets of glass his mother is in the habit of sticking on the girls’ backs at the slightest cough and which leave round pink or brown patches on their skin.

‘Bertha!’

‘I’ll get it,’ Minna says hurriedly, grimacing in pain as she gets up.

It is hot and calm, Frank’s smoke accumulates around the lamp, the fire purrs; there are four fires purring in the apartment, while a fine snow again starts falling from the sky, passing slowly in the darkness beyond the windows.

‘Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat? There’s liver sausage.’

Words, basically, are meaningless. They are only there to make contact. He realizes that it is his voice Lotte needs to hear, as if she wants to see if it has changed.

Because of old Miss Vilmos!

He smokes his cigarette, sitting deep in a dark-red velvet armchair, his legs stretched towards the fire. The most curious thing is that he senses guilty feelings in his mother. If she had recognized his footsteps earlier, would she have hidden the newspaper? Did he deliberately climb the stairs on tiptoe, skipping some steps?

The truth is, he wasn't thinking of Lotte but Sissy, for fear she would half open the door of the Holsts' apartment.

Right now, she is alone with her saucers. Does she go to bed while she is waiting for her father? Or does she stay awake, all alone, until midnight?

He was afraid, he admits it to himself, that the door would open and he would be obliged to go in and find himself alone with her in the dimly lit kitchen, maybe with the remains of a meal on the table.

In the evening, she probably takes down the folding bed. And the door of the bedroom stays open to let the warmth in.

It's all too sentimental, too sad, too ugly.

'Why don't you take your shoes off? Bertha!'

It is Bertha who will take them off for him. Sissy would take them off, too, wouldn't hesitate to get down on her knees.

'You look tired.'

'It's the cold.'

'You need to get a good night's sleep.'

He continues to understand. It is as if he was automatically translating a foreign language. Lotte is advising him to sleep alone, not to make love today. There is something she doesn't know, that she doesn't know yet, which he himself merely senses, which is that he has no desire for Minna, or Bertha, or even Sissy.

In a while, she will supervise the making of his bed.

'Will you be warm enough?'

'Yes.'

He won't sleep there. Tonight, he would go to anyone's bed, even an old woman's, because he needs someone next to him.

It looks as if Minna, who had no experience when she arrived – the insides of her thighs are still bow-shaped, like a little girl's – has learned

everything in three days. She has reached out her arm for him to put his head on. She is careful not to talk to him. She strokes him gently, the way nurses do.

His mother knows. There is no more room for doubt. The proof is that this morning's newspaper has disappeared. And there is a detail he notices, one that she would definitely deny. Kissing him, as she does every morning, she recoiled slightly from him in spite of herself. She immediately hated herself for it, and to make up for it was very sweet to him.

He will get the green card, he is convinced of it. To anyone else, that would represent an extraordinary success, an unattainable dream, because it puts you in the same position as – on the other side – the head of a network.

He could have been the head of a network.

He tried to join up, at the start, when they were still fighting with tanks and cannon, and he was sent back to school.

For a long time, he hung around a tenant on the fifth floor, a bachelor in his forties with a big brown moustache, who acted mysteriously and was, in fact, one of the first to be shot.

Has the violinist already been shot, or deported? Is he being tortured? . . . They will probably never know, and his mother will wear herself out more every day, as so many others have; for a while she will continue to queue, to go from office to office and be sent away from all of them, then they will stop seeing her, they will forget all about her, until one fine day the caretaker will make up his mind to call a locksmith.

They will find her in her bedroom, all shrivelled, having been dead for a week or more.

He doesn't feel any pity for her. He doesn't feel pity for anyone, himself included. He doesn't ask for pity, and he won't accept any, which is what annoys him about Lotte, who keeps giving him looks that are both anxious and loving.

What would interest him is having a good long man-to-man talk with Holst. This desire has been tormenting him for a long time, even when he wasn't yet aware of it.

Why Holst? He has no idea. He may never know. He refuses to think it's because he has never had a father.

Sissy is stupid. This morning, slipped under the door of the salon, there was an envelope addressed to Frank, which Bertha discovered as she was

doing the housework. In the envelope, a sheet of paper, with a question mark in pencil and a signature: Sissy.

Because he didn't get in touch with her yesterday! She's crying. She imagines her life is over. Just because of that insistence, he decides not to see her, to go to the cinema on his own if necessary, while waiting for his appointment with Kromer.

But she is even more stubborn than he thought. He has barely started down the stairs, taking care not to make any noise, when she comes out with her hat and coat on, all ready to go, which means she may have been waiting behind the door, dressed like that, for hours.

He has no choice but to wait for her in the street. Wisps of snow melt as they touch his lips.

'Don't you want to see me any more?'

'Of course I do.'

'You've been running away from me for the last two days.'

'I haven't been running away from anyone. I've been very busy.'

'Frank!'

Has she also been thinking about old Miss Vilmos? Is she intelligent enough to have made a connection with the item in the newspaper?

'Why don't you trust me?' she says reproachfully.

'I do.'

'You never tell me what you're up to.'

'Because it's no business of women.'

'I'm scared, Frank.'

'What of?'

'I'm scared for you.'

'Why do you even care?'

'Don't you understand?'

'Oh, yes.'

Night is starting to fall. The snow is still light. It's like with summer storms: when it goes on like this for too long, you end up waiting anxiously for a good solid snowfall that will cleanse the sky and make it possible to see the sun, if only for a few moments.

'Come.'

They link arms. Girls always like that.

'Did your father say anything to you?'

'Why?'

‘Does he suspect?’

‘If he did, it’d be awful.’

‘Do you think so?’

Frank’s scepticism appals her. ‘Frank!’

‘He’s a man like any other, isn’t he? He’s made love before, hasn’t he?’

‘Be quiet.’

‘Is your mother dead?’

She hesitates, flustered.

‘No.’

‘Are they divorced?’

‘She left.’

‘Who with?’

‘A dentist. Let’s not talk about that, Frank.’

They have passed the tannery. They come to the old basin, which used to be a harbour before they built the barrage. There is almost no water there any more, and the old boats that were left there, God knows why, are rotting away, some upside down.

In summer, the area where they are walking is a grassy embankment, where the neighbourhood children come to play.

‘Was he handsome, this dentist?’

‘I don’t know. I was too little.’

‘Did your father try to get her back?’

‘I don’t know, Frank. Let’s not talk about Daddy.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because!’

‘What did he do before?’

‘He wrote books and magazine articles.’

‘What kind of books?’

‘He was an art critic.’

‘Did he visit museums?’

‘He’s been to every museum in the world.’

‘What about you?’

‘Some of them.’

‘Paris?’

‘Yes.’

‘Rome?’

‘Yes. London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Berne . . .’

‘Did you stay in good hotels?’

‘Yes. Why do you ask me that?’

‘What do the two of you do together?’

‘Where?’

‘At home, when your father has finished driving his tram.’

‘He reads.’

‘What about you?’

‘He reads out loud. He explains things to me.’

‘What does he read?’

‘All kinds of books. He often reads poetry.’

‘Do you like it?’

She really wishes he would talk about something else! She feels him stiffen, senses that he hates her. However hard she tries to lean her weight on his arm and put her bare fingers through his, he pretends not to understand.

‘Come!’ he finally decides.

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘Somewhere near here. Timo’s. You’ll see.’

It is still early. There is no music. The people there are regulars doing deals with Timo or with each other. There are no women. And the colours of the walls and the lampshades seem harsher. It is like entering a theatre in the middle of the day, during a reception.

‘Frank . . .’

‘Sit down.’

‘I’d have preferred it if you’d taken me to the cinema.’

Because of the dark, of course! But it’s the dark that he doesn’t want right now. Or the acidic taste of her saliva. Or running his hand over her suspender.

‘Does it bother him, not seeing anyone?’

It takes her a moment to realize that he is still talking about her father.

‘No. Why should it bother him?’

‘I don’t know. Were you rich?’

‘I think so. I used to have a governess.’

‘Does driving a tram bring in much money?’

She looks for his hand under the table. ‘Frank!’ she begs

Taking no notice of her, he calls out, ‘Timo! Come here. We’d like to eat something good. Some nice starters. Then cutlets with French fries. But

first, send us over a bottle of Hungarian wine, you know the one I mean.'

He leans towards her. He is going to talk to her about her father again. The telephone rings. Timo, wiping his hands on his white apron, answers, looking at Frank.

'Yes . . . yes . . . I can get you that . . . Not too expensive, no, but it'll cost you all the same . . . Who? . . . No, I haven't seen him today . . . But your friend Frank is here . . .' He puts his hand over the receiver and says to Frank, 'It's Kromer. Do you want to talk to him?'

Frank stands up and grabs the phone.

'Is that you? . . . Did you get it? . . . Good . . . Yes . . . You can have them tonight . . . Where are you right now? . . . At home? . . . Are you dressed? . . . All alone? . . . I think you might like to drop by our friend Timo's . . . I can't tell you right now . . . What? . . . Something like that . . . No, not today! Today's just for looking . . . From a distance . . . No, if you play the fool, it's all off . . .'

When he returns to his place, Sissy asks, 'Who was that?'

'A friend.'

'Is he coming here?'

'No, of course not.'

'I thought you were asking him to come.'

'Not now, tonight.'

'Listen, Frank . . .'

'What now?'

'I want to go.'

'Why?'

They are brought thick cutlets and French fries on a silver platter. It must be months, probably years, since she last ate fries, let alone breaded cutlets with papillotes on the ends.

'I'm not hungry.'

'Too bad.'

She doesn't dare say that she is scared, but he senses that she is.

'What is this place?'

'A restaurant. A bar. A nightclub. It's whatever you want it to be. The door's always open. That's Timo's for you.'

'Do you come here often?'

'Every day.'

She makes an effort to chew her meat, then puts down her fork, discouraged, and sighs with what sounds like weariness:

‘I love you, Frank.’

‘Is it such a disaster?’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because you say it so tragically, as if it was a disaster.’

‘I love you,’ she repeats, looking straight ahead of her.

And he really feels like replying:

‘I don’t.’

Then he stops thinking about it, because Kromer comes in, with his fur-lined coat, his big cigar, his air of being, here as elsewhere, the main character. Without appearing to recognize Frank, he heads for the bar and hoists himself up on to one of the high stools, sighing contentedly.

‘Who’s that?’ Sissy asks.

‘What business is that of yours?’

Why is she instinctively scared of Kromer? He is looking at them, above all at her, through the smoke from his cigar, and when she lowers her head over her plate he takes advantage of it to wink at Frank.

Mechanically, she has started eating again, perhaps to put on a bold front, or in order not to meet Kromer’s gaze, and she eats so determinedly that she leaves nothing except the bones. She even eats the fat. She wipes her plate with her bread.

‘How old’s your father?’

‘Forty-five. Why?’

‘I’d have said sixty.’

He senses tears welling in her eyes, although she makes an effort to hold them back. He senses that her anger is struggling with another feeling, her desire to leave him here and walk out by herself, head held high. Would she even find the way out?

Very excited by now, Kromer is throwing Frank ever more meaningful looks.

Frank nods.

It’s a deal.

Too bad!

‘There’s cream cake.’

‘I’m not hungry any more.’

‘Bring us two cream cakes, Timo.’

Right now, Holst is driving his tram. The big lantern, which looks as if it's right up against his stomach, is pointing straight ahead, making yellow pools of light on the snow as the two black shiny lines of the rails cut across it. His little tin box must be lying near the handles. From time to time, perhaps, he bites into his slice of bread and butter and chews slowly, his feet in his felt boots held around his legs by pieces of string.

'Eat.'

'Do you really think you love me?'

'How can you ask that?'

'If I asked you to come away with me, would you do it?'

She looks him straight in the eyes. He has walked her home, and now they are back in her apartment. She has kept her hat and coat on. The old man must be starting to listen out behind his fanlight. He is bound to come in. They don't have much time.

'Would you like to go away, Frank?'

He shakes his head. 'What if I asked you to sleep with me?'

He has deliberately used an expression that shocks her.

She is still looking him full in the face. It is as if she wishes ardently that he would see deep into her clear eyes.

'Is that what you want?' she says.

'Not today.'

'Whenever you like.'

'Why do you love me?'

'I don't know.'

She says this with a slight hesitation, and her eyes are less clear. What was she about to say? There were other words on the tip of her tongue.

He would like to know but doesn't dare insist. He is slightly afraid of what she might say. Maybe he is wrong. He would swear – it's stupid, because there is nothing to make him think that – he would swear she was on the point of saying, 'Because you're unhappy.'

It isn't true. He won't allow it, he won't allow anyone to think something like that. Why is she even interested in him?

The neighbour is making his move. His breathing can be heard behind the door. He hesitates to knock. He knocks.

'Sorry, Miss Sissy. It's me again . . .'

She can't stop herself from smiling. Frank leaves, grunting a vague goodnight. He doesn't go to his apartment. He runs downstairs and heads back to Timo's.

'Tonight?' Kromer asks, his mouth watering.

Frank looks at him harshly. 'No,' he says curtly.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'Changed your mind?'

'No.'

He orders a drink, even though he is not thirsty.

'When?'

'Sunday night at the latest, because from Monday her father's back on the morning shift and is home from late afternoon onwards.'

'Have you told her?'

'She doesn't need to know.'

'I don't understand.' Kromer panics a little. 'You want to . . .?'

'No, no. I've got an idea. I'll explain when the time comes.'

His eyes are quite small. He has a headache. His skin is damp, and he sometimes shivers nervously, like someone who is starting to come down with flu.

'Have you got the green card?'

'You have to come with me to the offices tomorrow morning and pick it up.'

For now, there are the watches to deal with.

Why does he feel the need, just before midnight, to prowls the street, waiting for Holst to return home?

But he doesn't sleep at Lotte's – he doesn't even let her know – and makes do with Kromer's divan.



PART TWO

SISSY'S FATHER

1.

Minna is sick. They have put her on the camp bed usually reserved for Frank, and they carry her from one room to another, depending on the hour, because there is really no space in the apartment for someone who is sick. Nor can she be allowed back to her parents' in the state she is in, and it is impossible to call a doctor.

'It was Otto again!' Lotte told her son.

His real name is Schonberg. His first name is not Otto. Almost all the clients have their own special name here, especially those who are very well known, like Schonberg. He is quite old. Thousands of families depend on him, and people greet him fearfully in the street.

'Every time he promises he'll be careful, and the next time he starts again.'

There is Minna, with her red rubber hot-water bottle, Minna, who is pushed from room to room and spends much of her time in the kitchen, looking ashamed, as if it is all her fault.

Then there is the business of the green card, which entailed lots of comings and goings, because, at the last moment, all sorts of papers were required, five photographs instead of the three that Frank had brought.

'How come you're called Friedmaier like your mother? You should have your father's name.'

The redheaded clerk with thick orange-coloured skin found that suspicious. He, too, was afraid to take responsibility. From the office, while the clerk looked on in consternation, Kromer had to telephone the general.

Frank got his card in the end, but it took hours. He still looks as if he has flu, although he does not have a temperature. Lotte often gives him surreptitious glances. She wonders why he is so agitated all of a sudden.

'You'd do better to rest, to stay in bed a day or two.'

For Saturday, though, which is the most important day at Lotte's, he again takes it upon himself to find a replacement for Minna. He knows

where to look. He has lots of contacts.

All of that takes time. He is constantly busy, and yet it is as if those two days do not want to end.

And always the dirty snow, the heaps of snow that look rotten, with black patches and embedded garbage. The white powder that occasionally peels off from the crust of the sky in little clumps, like plaster from a ceiling, is unable to cover the filth.

He took Sissy to the cinema again. By then, everything was already decided, finalized between Kromer and him, but of course Sissy knew nothing.

That was also the day he asked his mother:

‘Are you going out on Sunday?’

‘Probably. Why?’

She goes out every Sunday. She, too, goes to the cinema, then to eat cakes and listen to music.

‘Do you think Bertha will go to her parents?’

They don’t work on Sundays. Bertha is sure to see her parents, who live in the country and think she is in domestic service.

There will only be Minna in the apartment. There is nothing he can do about that.

In the cinema – it was the Friday – immediately after they sat down, Sissy asked, like a little girl begging:

‘Do you really want me to do it? I know I do.’

She shifted her chair a little, removed Frank’s arm, took off her own hat, then snuggled her head in the hollow of his shoulder.

Her first sigh expressed such innocent satisfaction, anyone would have thought she was going to purr.

‘Are you OK? You’re not bored, are you?’

He said nothing. Maybe she had her eyes closed throughout, and he was the one who saw the film this time.

He didn’t touch her that afternoon. He was embarrassed to kiss her. It was she who glued her lips to his, abruptly, just once, as they were nearing home, and just as she left him, she said very quickly, her mind made up:

‘Thank you, Frank.’

It’s too late. It’s all started, in a way. On the Saturday, the military police suddenly decide to search the apartment of the violinist and his mother. Frank had just gone out when they arrived. By the time he gets back, it is

clear, from the outside, that there is something abnormal in the appearance of the building, though it is hard to say exactly what. In the entrance, a man in plain clothes is standing next to the caretaker, who is trying to appear natural.

When Frank gets to the first-floor landing – he went out to phone Kromer – he finds three or four uniformed men stopping housewives from getting back to their apartments, while at the same time preventing other tenants from going out.

Everyone is silent. There is a sense of gloom. More uniforms can be glimpsed in the corridor, and the violinist's door – have they brought him with them to be present at the search? – the violinist's door is open, there are noises as if the furniture is being smashed, and from time to time the imploring voice of an old woman weeping her eyes out.

Frank calmly takes out his green card, which he hasn't yet used; and everyone sees it, everyone knows what it means; the soldiers stand aside to let him pass; behind him, the silence has become even heavier.

He did it deliberately. As a matter of fact, the day before, he had brought Minna a dressing gown. He didn't buy it in a shop: it has been a long time since the shops have had quilted satin dressing gowns. Not that he would have bothered to go into a shop to buy it anyway.

He already had in his pockets all the money that is still there now and he doesn't know where to put it. It is his share from the watches, enough large notes to feed an ordinary family, even two or three families, for years. In a corner of Timo's, someone was displaying some merchandise, as often happens, and Frank bought the dressing gown.

He felt rather as if he was buying it for Sissy. Not exactly, since everything was already decided, down to the practical details. He can't explain it. He would give it to Minna, of course, but that wouldn't stop him from thinking about Sissy. Lotte will be furious. She will say they will look as if they are trying to apologize to Minna for the accident that befell her with that brute Otto.

It is the first time he has bought anything for a woman, a personal item, and, crazy as it may be, Sissy is at the back of his mind.

There was all that. There was the replacement for Saturday – she has already arrived and she is a prickly character. What else happened?

Nothing . . . Still that flu that won't end but doesn't declare itself, that persistent headache, that discomfort throughout his body, too vague to

deserve the name of illness. The sky as white as a sheet, whiter and purer than the snow. It seems to have hardened, and only a little icy powder falls from it now.

On Sunday morning, he tried to read, then stuck his face up against the frosty windowpanes and looked out at the empty street for so long, staying so still, that Lotte, who was more and more worried about him, muttered, 'You'd do better to have your bath while there's hot water. Bertha's waiting her turn. If she goes before you, the water will be lukewarm by the time you get in.'

Since the bedrooms aren't used on Sundays, the idea was to put Minna to bed in the small room all day long, and Lotte was surprised to hear her son say categorically:

'No. She'll sleep in the big bedroom.'

Lotte senses that something is up. She knows he is expecting a visitor, and she must have guessed it is Sissy. That's precisely why she was keeping the big bedroom free, thinking she would please him. Now she really doesn't understand.

'Whatever you want! Are you planning to stay in?'

'I really don't know. But I'd prefer it if you didn't come back too early.'

Minna is stupidly grateful to him for the dressing gown, which she insists on wearing in bed today. She thinks he is being nice to her. For no other reason than that, before having his bath he throws Bertha down on the bed – like every morning she has nothing on her overgrown baby's body but her dressing gown – and makes love to her.

It lasts less than three minutes. It's as if he's furious, as if he's taking his revenge. He doesn't even put his cheek against her cheek. Their heads don't touch. When it's over, he leaves her without a word.

All the while, a nice kitchen smell hangs in the rooms. Everyone ends up washed and dressed. They eat. Lotte is dressed almost the way she used to be when she came to see him in the country, and she has barely aged since then. He suspects vaguely that it is only because of him that she has set up this manicure business and given up seeing clients herself.

She is quite wrong to put herself out for him.

Bertha, who has to take two trams, is the first to leave. Then Lotte powders her face, looks at herself in the mirror and hangs about a while longer, for no reason, still anxious.

'I think I'll have dinner in town.'

‘I’d prefer that.’

She kisses him once on each cheek, then a second time on the first cheek, which he hates, because it reminds him of his nurse. It’s a habit some women have. He counts mechanically under his breath:

‘ . . . two . . . three!’

She has gone. Now she too is waiting for a tram on the corner of the street. He knows that Minna, embarrassed to be spending all day in the big bed – which at night is Lotte’s bed – is finding it hard to concentrate on the Zola novel he has lent her.

She is expecting him to come and talk to her, although she hardly dares believe it. She, too, has seen him from the window, walking with Sissy. She, too, has heard him knock at Holst’s door.

She wouldn’t allow herself to be jealous, at least not to show it. She knows she wasn’t a virgin, that she came to Lotte’s of her own free will, that she has nothing to hope for.

After an hour, though, she attempts a little ploy. She starts by breathing heavily, then moans and drops her book on the rug.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asks, coming into the room.

‘It hurts.’

He takes the hot-water bottle, fills it in the kitchen, places it back on her belly and, to make it quite clear that he has no desire to start a conversation, picks up the book and puts it down on the blanket.

She doesn’t dare call him back in. She doesn’t hear him moving. She wonders what he’s doing. He isn’t reading: with all the doors open, she would hear him turn the pages. He isn’t drinking. He isn’t sleeping. From time to time, he simply goes to the window and stands there for a while.

She is afraid for him, not suspecting that is the best way to alienate him. He is old enough to know what he is doing. What he is doing is what he wants. And he does it coldly. From time to time this afternoon, he even goes and looks at himself fleetingly in the mirror to make sure that his features are perfectly calm.

Wasn’t it he who attracted Holst’s attention in the alley, even though it wasn’t necessary, even though without that there would have been no witness to his act?

And when it came to Miss Vilmos, did he try to cover his tracks?

He won’t accept pity from anyone. Or anything that feels like pity. He mustn’t be so cowardly as to start feeling any for himself.

That's something none of them will ever understand, not Lotte, not Minna, not Sissy. As far as Sissy is concerned, there will soon be no question of that anyway.

What was she thinking about, with her head on his shoulder, all the time the film was playing? Every now and again, she would lift her head and ask:

'I'm not tiring you, am I?'

His arm was numb, but nothing would have possessed him to tell her that.

Kromer won't understand either. In fact, he already doesn't understand. Deep down, he's nervous, although he won't admit it. Nervous about everything and nothing. It is Frank he finds disconcerting. When Frank had his green card in his pocket and they had just left the offices of the military police, Kromer asked, 'What are you going to do with it?'

Frank gave himself the wicked pleasure of replying, 'Nothing.'

Kromer doesn't believe him. He tries to figure out what he is planning. He is no more reassured when it comes to Sissy.

'Have you really not touched her?'

'Just enough to make sure she's a virgin.'

'Doesn't that mean anything to you?' Kromer pretends to laugh, and says with a wink, 'You're too young!'

He is so ill at ease that Frank spends much of the afternoon wondering if he will come. Kromer is crazy. He must have been thinking about Sissy all night long, tossing and turning in his bed. But he is the kind of man who might have cold feet at the last moment and go and get drunk at Leonard's or some other place instead of keeping his appointment.

'Why didn't you tell her the truth?'

'Because she wouldn't have agreed.'

'Do you think she's in love with you? Is that what you mean?'

'Maybe.'

'And when she realizes?'

'I suppose it'll be too late.'

Deep down, they are all a bit scared of him because he is going all the way.

'What if her father shows up?'

'He's not allowed to abandon his tram.'

The trams run on Sundays.

‘What about the neighbours?’

Frank prefers not to mention Mr Wimmer, who knows a lot and might indeed get it into his head to intervene.

‘The neighbours are out on Sundays,’ he replies confidently. ‘If need be, I’ll show my card, that’ll keep them quiet.’

It’s true, generally speaking. But they have seen idiots get arrested for less than that, for the pleasure of yelling insults at passing soldiers in front of their friends. Almost always, they are people like Mr Wimmer.

Wimmer still hasn’t said anything to Holst. Is it because he wants to avoid worrying him, because he thinks he is clever enough to keep an eye on Sissy himself? Or because he is convinced she is too sensible to do anything stupid? Old people are like that. Including those who have had a child before marriage. Later, they forget.

Minna sighs again. Night has fallen. Frank is kind enough to light the lamp for her, close the curtains and fill the hot-water bottle one last time.

He would have preferred it if she wasn’t there, if there weren’t any witnesses. But what of it? Isn’t it actually quite desirable for someone to know, someone who won’t say a word?

‘Will she come?’

He doesn’t reply. The main reason he has chosen the back bedroom is that it has a door that communicates directly with the corridor. It’s also because you can get to it from the kitchen.

‘Will she come, Frank?’

It’s a lapse of taste. In front of his mother, she calls him Mr Frank. It is annoying that she should be more familiar when they are alone, and he replies irritably:

‘It’s none of your business.’

She looks apologetic, then can’t help asking almost immediately:

‘Is it her first time?’

No, especially not that! No pity, please! He hates the way these girls feel sorry for those who haven’t yet gone through what they’ve been through themselves. He bets she is going to ask him not to hurt Sissy.

Fortunately, Kromer rings the bell. He has come in spite of everything. He is actually ten minutes early, which is annoying, because Frank has absolutely no desire to talk. Kromer is just out of his bath; his skin is too pink, too taut; he smells like a whore.

‘Are you alone?’

‘No.’

‘Your mother?’

‘No.’ He deliberately says in a louder voice, ‘There’s a girl next door whose insides were damaged by a pervert.’

Kromer would happily beat a retreat, but Frank has taken care to close the door behind him.

‘Come in. Don’t worry. Take your coat off.’

He notes with contempt that Kromer isn’t smoking his usual cigar but instead is sucking a cachou lozenge.

‘What are you drinking?’

He is afraid to drink, afraid it might diminish his performance.

‘Come into the kitchen. That’s where you’ll wait. In this apartment, the kitchen’s the holy of holies.’

Frank laughs like someone who’s been drinking, and yet the glass he chinks against Kromer’s is his first today. Fortunately, Kromer doesn’t know that. If he did, it would really scare him.

‘Right. It’ll happen just like I said.’

‘What if she puts the light on?’

‘Have you ever seen a girl put the light on in a situation like that?’

‘What if she talks to me, and I don’t reply?’

‘She won’t talk,’ he asserts.

Even these ten minutes are long. He watches them pass on the dial of the alarm-clock above the stove.

‘You need to have a clear idea of the way you’ll have to go in the dark. Come with me. The bed’s here, so it will be on your right directly after you come in.’

‘Yes.’

He has to have another drink, or he is the one who will lose his nerve. And he mustn’t do that at any cost. Frank has planned this like a piece of clockwork, with the meticulousness of a child.

There are things that can’t be explained, things it is pointless trying to make another person understand: it absolutely has to happen; afterwards, he’ll be fine.

‘Have you got it?’

‘Yes.’

‘On the right, directly after the door.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m switching the light off.’

‘But where will you be?’

‘Here.’

‘You swear you won’t go away?’

And to think that, ten days ago, he still considered Kromer someone older and stronger than him – a man, in other words – and thought of himself as a child!

‘You’re making such a fuss about it!’ he says scornfully, to strengthen Kromer’s resolve.

‘No, my friend, I’m thinking of you. I don’t know the apartment. I want to avoid—’

‘Shh!’

She came. Like a mouse. And Frank, at that moment, had such a sixth sense that he heard Minna get out of bed, barefoot, without making a noise, in her beautiful dressing gown, and go to the door to listen. Which means Minna heard the Holsts’ door open and close. What led her to go and see was probably the fact that there were no footsteps on the stairs after that, as there usually are.

Who knows? Anything is possible. Maybe Minna saw another door that was not quite closed, that moved, old Wimmer’s door? Frank is convinced that old Wimmer is on the alert.

But Minna doesn’t know that. On reflection, Frank is convinced she doesn’t know, because she would have been too afraid for him and would have come running to warn him.

Sissy walked down the corridor, barely touching the uneven floor. She knocked, or rather tapped, on the door of the small bedroom.

He switched off the lamps. If they talked loudly, Kromer would be able to hear them from the kitchen.

‘Here I am,’ she said.

She felt quite stiff in his arms.

‘You asked me to, Frank.’

‘Yes.’

He closed the door behind her, but there was still the kitchen door, which she couldn’t see in the dark and which was ajar.

‘Do you still want to?’

They couldn't see anything except the vague glow of the streetlamp on the corner in the gap between the curtains.

'Yes, I do.'

He didn't need to undress her. He started, but she continued by herself, without a word, close to the bed.

Maybe she despises him, but can't stop herself from loving him. He doesn't know. He doesn't want to know. Kromer hears them.

'Tomorrow, it would have been too late,' he says, barely able to utter the words, finding them stupid. 'Your father will be back on the morning shift.'

She must be almost naked, she is naked. He can feel the softness of the clothes and underwear beneath his feet. She is waiting. Now comes the hardest part: laying her down on the bed.

She gropes in the dark for his hand.

'Frank!' she murmurs, and it is the first time she has said his name in that tone. It is a good thing Kromer is behind the door.

'I'll be right back,' he says, very quickly, very low.

He brushes against Kromer as they pass each other. He almost has to push him into the bedroom. He immediately closes the door behind him, with a haste he would find hard to explain, and now he stands there, motionless.

There is no town any more, no Lotte, no Minna, nobody, no trams on the corner of the street, no cinema, no world. There is nothing now but a mounting emptiness, an anguish that brings the sweat out on his temples and forces him to put his hand on the left side of his chest.

Someone touches him, and he almost cries out; it takes all his strength to hold back. He knows it is Minna, Minna who has left the door of the big bedroom ajar, so that a little light seeps out.

Can she see him? Did she see him when she came in, before she touched him and woke him, the way you would touch a sleepwalker?

He says nothing. He hates her, he will always hate her for not having come out with some stupid phrase or other, the kind they're all so good at.

But no! She stays beside him, as stiff and white as him, in the halo that's too dim to make out their features, and it's only a long time afterwards that he realizes it's on his wrist that she has placed her hand.

It is as if she is taking his pulse. Does she think he is sick? He won't allow her to think of him as a sick person, to keep looking at him like that, he won't allow her to see what nobody has a right to see.

‘Frank!’

Someone has called out his name. It is Sissy, Sissy who called out his name, Sissy who is now running barefoot to the door and rattling it, Sissy crying for help or trying to escape.

Maybe because this other girl, whom Frank doesn’t like, whom he despises, who is only a slut, less than nothing, maybe because Minna is still stupidly holding on to his wrist, he doesn’t move.

Now there is a commotion in the bedroom, like when the military police were searching the violinist’s apartment. The two of them are coming and going, barefoot, chasing each other, struggling, and Kromer’s voice can be heard, trying not to panic.

‘At least put something on!’ he begs. ‘For goodness’ sake! I swear I won’t touch you again!’

‘The key!’

It will come back to him later. Now, he doesn’t think. He doesn’t move. He’s going to go all the way. He vowed that he would go all the way.

Kromer, in spite of everything, has had the presence of mind to grab the key. True, there is light in the room. There is a thin strip of luminous pink under the door. Was it Sissy who switched the light on? Did she somehow find the little switch hanging at the head of the bed?

What are they doing? They are moving about. It sounds like a battle, with dull, inexplicable thuds.

‘Not until you’ve put something on,’ Kromer keeps saying like a broken record.

She hasn’t mentioned Frank any more. She only spoke his name once, screaming it with all her might.

If any of the neighbours are in, they must be hearing this. It is Minna who thinks of that. Frank still doesn’t move. There is only one question he would like to ask, a question that has become so essential that he would ask it on his knees if need be.

‘Did Kromer . . .?’

Something inside him breaks.

She has gone. The door has slammed shut. There are footsteps in the corridor. Minna has let go of his wrist and run into the bedroom, because she thinks of everything, even of half opening the door to the landing.

Kromer doesn’t appear immediately. If Frank knows him, he is probably anxiously adjusting his clothes. At last he opens the door.

‘Well, my friend, you and your bright ideas!’

Frank doesn’t react.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘If you’d warned me there was a light switch at the head of the bed, I’d have sorted it out.’

Frank doesn’t react, won’t react.

‘I was careful not to answer her. I could feel her hand groping in the dark, but I never imagined she’d switch the light on.’

Frank hasn’t asked the question. His eyes have grown quite small, there is a hard look in them, so hard that Kromer is a bit scared and wonders for a moment if the whole thing wasn’t a trap.

But how could it be? That wouldn’t make any sense!

‘Anyway, now you can boast . . .’

Minna comes back and switches on the main light, flooding them with a white light that makes them blink.

‘She ran downstairs like a madwoman,’ she says. ‘She didn’t try to go back to her apartment. One of the neighbours, Mr Wimmer, tried to stop her. I don’t think she even saw him.’

Well, it’s done!

Kromer can go now. He is scared stiff. He doesn’t think of leaving. He is furious. ‘When will I see you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you coming to Timo’s tonight?’

‘Maybe.’

She has gone. Mr Wimmer tried to stop her. She ran down the stairs.

‘Tell me, little Frank, seems to me you’re—’

Fortunately, he breaks off. He isn’t anybody’s ‘little Frank’ now. He never was. They all imagined what they wanted.

But now he has paid his dues.

‘What?’ he asks, absently, as if he hasn’t been listening.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. I’m just asking: what?’

‘And I was asking if you were going to be at Timo’s tonight.’

‘And I’m answering: what?’

He can’t stand it any more. The feeling on the left side of his chest is getting to be unbearable, as if he is about to die.

‘Well, my friend—’

‘Yes, go!’

He just wants to sit down, to lie down. Why doesn’t Kromer go? Let him tell Timo and his friends whatever he likes!

Frank has done what he wanted to do. He has turned the corner. He has looked on the other side.

He didn’t see what he had been expecting to see.

Never mind!

Why doesn’t Kromer go? For God’s sake, why doesn’t he go?

‘What are you waiting for?’

‘But . . .’

Minna, who has gone into the bedroom, who should never have taken that liberty, who is incapable of understanding these things, comes back with one black stocking in each hand.

Sissy left without her stockings, with her feet bare in her shoes.

And Kromer doesn’t understand either. If they both continue, he is going to go mad, throw himself on the floor, bite something, anything.

‘Get out of here, for God’s sake! Just get out!’

Won’t anyone realize that he has turned the corner and that he has nothing more in common with them?

2.

In the garden of Mrs Porse, his nurse, there was only one tree, a big lime tree. Once, as night was just starting to fall and a low sky seemed to be weighing on the earth and gradually absorbing everything like a fog, the dog started barking, and they discovered a strange cat in the tree.

It was winter. The barrel of rainwater beneath the drainpipe was frozen. From behind the house, you could see the lights come on in the windows of the village, one after the other.

The cat was huddled on the first branch, four or five metres from the ground, staring down. It was black and white and did not belong to anyone local: Mrs Porse, the nurse, knew all the cats.

When the dog barked, the tub standing on the tiled floor of the kitchen had just been filled with hot water for Frank's bath. Actually, it was not a real tub, but half of a barrel that had been sawn down the middle. The windows were steamed up. From the garden, they could hear Mr Porse, who was a road mender, say with the conviction he brought to everything, especially when he had been drinking a bit, which happened frequently:

'I'll get my rifle and shoot it.'

Frank caught the word rifle. The hunting rifle was hanging on the white wall above the fireplace. Already half dressed, Frank put his jacket and trousers back on.

'Try to catch it first. It might not be as badly wounded as all that.'

They could still see clearly enough to make out red stains on the white parts of the fur, and one of the cat's eyes was coming out of its socket.

Frank would no longer be able to say how exactly it happened. Very soon, there were five people, ten people, looking up, not to mention the children. Then someone came with a lantern.

They tried to attract the cat by placing a saucer of hot milk in full view on the ground. Naturally, they had first taken care to tie the dog to its

kennel. Everyone was standing back, avoiding abrupt movements. But the cat did not budge. From time to time, it would miaow plaintively.

‘See? It’s calling.’

‘It may be calling, but it’s not calling us!’

The proof of that was that when someone tried to grab it by climbing on a chair, it jumped on to a higher branch.

This all lasted a long time, at least an hour. Neighbours kept arriving, and they could only be recognized by their voices. A young man climbed the tree, and each time he reached out his arm, the cat climbed higher, so that by the end, all that was visible from below was a dark ball of fur.

‘On the left, Helmut . . . At the end of the big branch . . .’

The most surprising thing was that, as soon as they abandoned the hunt, the wounded animal miaowed even more. It was as if it was indignant at being abandoned!

So they went to look for ladders. Everyone joined in, very excited; Mr Porse kept talking about going to get his rifle, and they told him to shut up.

They did not get the cat down. They had to go home. They left some milk and some cat food.

‘If it was able to get up, it’ll be able to come down.’

The next day, the cat was still in the lime tree, almost at the top, and miaowed all day long. They again tried to catch it. They stopped Frank from going to have a look at it, because of the eye coming out of its head. Even Mrs Porse was almost ill because of it.

He never learned the end of the story. On the third day, he was told that the cat had gone. Was it true, or did they tell him that to spare his feelings?

That is almost what has happened now, except that this time, it is not a cat that is involved but Sissy.

Frank ended up going into the back room, all alone, almost solemnly, carefully closing the doors behind him, rather as he would have entered a mortuary.

Avoiding looking at the sheets, he straightened the blanket and might have been about to lie down on the bed when he noticed an object on the night table.

A few moments earlier, he had held Sissy’s stockings in his hand, woollen stockings with the feet finely darned, the way young girls are taught to do in convents.

It wasn't out of curiosity that he picked up the handbag from the night table. He just wanted to touch it. There was nothing to stop him, since he was alone. And that was when a thought occurred to him. He remembered Lotte, who almost always rang the bell when she came home and would apologize by saying, 'I left my key in my old bag again.'

Sissy also has a key, the key to the apartment opposite. And where would she have put this key if not in her handbag? She didn't think of it when she fled. At that moment, she wasn't thinking about going home. She didn't even see Mr Wimmer, who was trying to stop her as she passed.

So the key was here, in the bag, with a handkerchief and some ration cards, a few banknotes, some small change and a pencil.

'Where are you going, Mr Frank?'

It was not yet six. He clearly saw the black hands on the dial of the alarm-clock in the kitchen. Minna hadn't gone back to bed but was sitting by the stove. She was calling him Mr Frank again and watching him with a fearful look on her face.

He didn't realize he was holding a little black oilcloth bag, or that he wasn't wearing a coat or a hat as he opened the door.

'At least put your coat on if you go out.'

People who are sick don't feel their own sickness when they have someone sicker than themselves to look after. Minna could no longer feel the pain in her insides. If she hadn't known that he wouldn't have allowed it, she would have gone with Frank.

'You will come straight back, won't you? You're not well.'

The door opposite was shut, with no thin line of pink light beneath it. Frank walked resolutely down the stairs. It was as if he knew where to find her.

At the end of Green Street, there is a street on the right, the one where Timo's is, with the old basin behind. From that street, you get to Bridge Street, and once there you are almost in the centre of town; there are lights, shops, people on the streets.

If, on the other hand, you turn left, as he did once with Sissy, all you see are the backs of houses and patches of waste ground. Some parts of the basin are filled in, others not. They started building a teacher training college here, but the war interrupted the work; all that is left is a huge roofless carcass, with iron girders and unfinished walls. Two rows of trees, still quite small and thin, protected by railings, demarcate what was meant

to be a boulevard, but it is pitted with gullies and ends in a sheer drop into a sand quarry.

Night had fallen. For the whole of this part of town, there was just a single streetlamp, which seemed to have been forgotten, whereas on the other side of the river the lights formed an almost continuous garland in front of the houses and there were trams passing.

He knew he would find her again, but he wanted to avoid scaring her. He had no intention of talking to her. He just wanted to give her back her key. Because Holst wouldn't be home before midnight, and she couldn't stay outside, her feet bare in her shoes, her legs bare, without any money.

He passed close to someone, a man, on the corner of the street, and he was certain it was Mr Wimmer. He recoiled for a moment, feeling afraid, because if the man had taken it into his head to hit him, he would have been obliged to let him do it.

Mr Wimmer, too, must be looking for Sissy. Maybe he had followed her for a while and had only lost track of her on the waste ground?

For a split second, the two men almost touched. There was a little light here. Although you couldn't see the moon, it was behind the clouds and made it possible to make out the outlines of objects.

Did Mr Wimmer see the handbag Frank is still holding in his hand? Did he think of the key? Did he understand what the young man was doing here?

In any case, he has let him pass. Frank walks in all directions, very fast, bumping into heaps of hardened snow; every now and again, he stops abruptly and looks around him.

He would like to call out Sissy's name, but that would probably be the best way for her not to come, for her to plunge further into the dark patches of waste ground or for her to go to ground somewhere, like the black and white cat in the village.

Occasionally, there is the sound of something moving, and he hurries forwards but finds nothing. Then he hears footsteps going in another direction, breaks into a run and realizes that it is Mr Wimmer, who has been following a route parallel to his.

Several times, his feet have broken through crusts of very hard ice and his legs have disappeared from the knees down.

She is there. He has seen her. He has recognized her figure and hasn't dared rush forwards, or speak, or call out; he has simply held out the bag at

arm's length, the way they showed the saucer of milk to the cat.

She has already set off again. She has disappeared into an area of shadow and only now does he risk crying out, in a voice he is ashamed of in this desert of silence:

‘The key!’

He glimpses her again as she crosses a white patch and he runs, stumbling, repeating, ‘The key!’

He doesn't want to say her name, because it might scare her away. He should have given the bag to Mr Wimmer: he might have been able to get to her. He didn't think of it. Nor did Mr Wimmer. Does the old neighbour really have a better chance than him? Frank can't see him or hear him any more. He is too old to be wading through this terrain strewn with potholes! She isn't far, barely a hundred metres away. But the man who climbed the tree in Mrs Porse's garden several times had his hand just a few centimetres from the cat. Everyone thought he would get it. Maybe the cat was hesitating over what to do, then, at the last moment, jumped on to a higher branch.

The river is frozen, but the sewer, which stops the ice from forming over a fairly wide expanse, isn't far.

He tries again, once, twice. He could almost weep with discouragement.

It's becoming an obsession: the key. That shiny, worn little bag, with a handkerchief, ration cards, a bit of money and a key.

Then, since he is not far from her, since she can surely see him, he chooses the brightest spot to come to a halt. He stands there, motionless, holding the bag out at arm's length, and repeats at the top of his voice, unconcerned that he might seem ridiculous:

‘The key!’

He waves the bag. He would like to be sure she sees him and understands. As ostentatiously as possible, he puts it down in full view on the snow.

‘The key!’ he repeats. ‘I'm leaving it here!’

It's best if he goes, for her sake. As long as he is prowling around, she will be suspicious. Discouraged, he trudges off, literally tears himself away from the waste ground, forces himself back on to the rails, on to that black path between the banks of snow that constitutes the pavement of his street.

He doesn't go to Timo's, even though it is very close. He passes the dark alley beside the tannery without noticing it. As he enters the building, the

caretaker watches him from behind his curtain. He must already know. By tonight, or tomorrow, the whole building will know.

He climbs the stairs. There is no light in Mr Wimmer's apartment, which means he isn't back yet.

It all starts to form a grey, inconsistent, monotonous fog. The hours pass, one by one. They're certainly the longest he has ever experienced. So much so that he sometimes feels like crying out when he looks at the alarm-clock and sees the hands in the same place.

Of all those hours, though, nothing will remain, just a few scraps, a residue, like a heap of ashes in a fireplace.

His mother coming home, her perfume immediately taking possession of the room. She only looks at him for a second. It is to Minna that she then turns, Minna to whom she motions to join her in the big bedroom. Do they think he can't hear them whispering? Let Minna tell her everything! As it happens, she doesn't wait for his permission. She must think she is obliged, for his sake. From now on, they are going to start protecting him!

He doesn't care.

'I'd like you to eat something, Frank, just a little.'

Lotte is expecting him to say no. But he does eat. He can't remember what, but he does eat. Then his mother goes and tidies the bed in the back room. Minna doesn't go back to bed. Assuming an innocent air, she sits in one of the armchairs in the salon, as close as possible to the door, keeping watch.

Who are they afraid of? Holst? The police? Old Wimmer?

He smiles contemptuously.

'You can go to bed, Frank. Your room is ready. Unless you prefer the big bedroom tonight?'

But he didn't go to bed. He would be incapable of saying what he did, what he thought about. There were moments – and this is the only thing he remembers – when the objects around him started coming to life in front of his eyes, just as they did when he was little: a brass ashtray, for instance, on which the gleams of light became eyes, an upholstered stool by the stove where his mother is in the habit of putting her feet when she sews.

These hours gave the impression they would never end, and yet they did. He was given something to drink, something with lemon and alcohol. His socks were changed, and he let them put his slippers on him. The women

talked about Bertha, who wasn't due back until the next morning and who would try to bring back a piece of pork and some sausages.

Mr Wimmer came back at about eight o'clock, alone. As other tenants from all the floors came in, the caretaker probably brought them up to date.

Maybe Sissy is already dead?

Mr Porse kept repeating that it was better to finish off the cat with a good shot from his rifle. There must be those in the building who think the same thing about Sissy; others who, if they dared, would happily murder Frank.

He doesn't care about that either.

'Why don't you go to bed?'

And as they both knew what he was waiting for, Lotte added:

'We'll listen out. I promise I'll wake you if there's any news.'

Did he burst out laughing? He certainly felt like it.

It has to end one way or another. In the case of the cat, it lasted at least two days. Did the animal really just set off again, with its eye hanging out?

It is more likely that Mr Porse ended up using his rifle when Frank was at school, and that they preferred to lie to him.

There are the long minutes preceding midnight, even longer than those that preceded five o'clock. That time is already so distant, it belongs to another world. It is the two women who are the first to jump when they hear footsteps on the stairs, but they pretend to continue with what they are doing, one sewing, the other reading the novel by Zola, though she would probably be hard put to tell the story.

The door downstairs has slammed. It's him. It can only be him, and he will be stopped as he passes; the caretaker must be waiting for him to tell him the news. How is it that footsteps are immediately heard on the stairs? It's still confused. As far as the first floor, the sound is barely perceptible. Starting from the second floor, Frank recognizes the soft sound of felt boots on the stairs, at the same time as the rhythm of someone else's steps.

He has stopped breathing. Minna was about to get up and half open the door to take a look, but Lotte has ordered her with a sign not to move. The three of them are listening. The other steps are those of a woman; they make out the click of high heels, then hear the key turn in the lock. And Holst's voice saying simply, gently:

'Go on!'

Frank won't learn until much later that she was waiting for her father at the corner of the alley, in the very place where, one night, he himself had

stood with his back against the wall. He may also learn that she was on the verge of letting him pass, that Holst was already no longer visible from the corner where she was huddled when, her strength failing, she cried, 'Father!'

Now they are home. The door has shut behind them.

'Please go to bed now, Frank. Be sensible.'

He knows why she is saying that. His mother is afraid that once his daughter is in bed, Holst will come and knock at their door. She would prefer to receive him herself. If she dared – but Frank's excessively motionless stare puts her off – she would advise Frank to go and spend a few days in the country, or at a friend's.

And yet it all happens simply! Old Wimmer hasn't emerged from his lair. He can't be in bed either. Through his fanlight, he can hear everything.

Did Holst go to bed that night? For a long time, there was noise in his apartment. They must still have a little wood or coal left, because he lit a fire; they poked it and put on water to boil.

The light was kept on. Frank half opened the door twice, the first time at 1.30 in the morning, the second just after three, and the pink line was still visible under the door opposite.

He didn't sleep either. He stayed in the salon, where the women insisted on setting up the camp bed for him. They tried, without success, to knock him out with hot toddies. He drank everything they gave him and kept a clear head. He has never been as clear-headed in his life! It almost scares him, as if there is something supernatural about it.

The women undressed. His mother gave Minna some kind of treatment. He heard the whole of their conversation, a technical conversation all about female organs. Otto's name was again mentioned.

Maybe they thought he was sleeping. Lotte was quite surprised, as she was about to switch off the light, to hear her son's clear voice utter categorically:

'No.'

'Whatever you like. But try to get some rest.'

It was about five o'clock that Holst opened his door and went and knocked at Mr Wimmer's. He had to knock several times. They talked in low voices in the corridor, then presumably Mr Wimmer got dressed. He now knocked at the Holsts' door in his turn, and Holst opened immediately.

Holst left. It wasn't hard for Frank to figure it out. He was going to fetch a doctor. It was not yet the hour when people are allowed to be on the streets, but Holst didn't care. He could have tried to phone from downstairs. Frank would have done the same as him. Doctors don't like to put themselves out, especially not when they're phoned.

He has to go a long way. There are no doctors in the neighbourhood these days, apart from a bearded old man who's almost always drunk – nobody trusts him, and virtually all his patients are charity cases.

Holst has to cross the river. He finds one in the end, since at six o'clock a vehicle pulls up in the street. What if it's an ambulance? What if she's being taken away?

Frank runs to the window and tries to see but can only make out two headlights.

Just two men climb the stairs. If they were taking Sissy away, there would be nurses and a stretcher.

He switches off the light, because he doesn't want Holst to know that he is watching, maybe out of decency, maybe because it would look like a provocation. He certainly isn't acting out of fear. He isn't afraid of Holst. He won't do anything to avoid him. On the contrary!

The doctor stayed for a long time. The stove was refilled and poked, and they had to put water on again to boil. Did Sissy pick up her bag from where he left it? Did she understand what he was doing? If she didn't, her father will have to go to great lengths to get hold of new ration cards.

The doctor stayed for half an hour. Mr Wimmer ought to have left, but he stayed, not getting back to his own apartment until 6.50.

That was how those hours passed. Frank slept after that. He slept so deeply that he didn't notice when they carried his bed into the kitchen, put it up against the stove and placed a hot-water bottle on his feet.

The kitchen doesn't look directly on to the street. Daylight only comes in through the fanlight. And yet, when he opens his eyes, he knows immediately that something has changed. The stove is humming, within reach of his hand. He is forced to sit up in order to see the alarm-clock. It is eleven o'clock. From the next room, he recognizes Bertha's voice, her peasant accent.

'You really should stay in bed, Frank!' Lotte says, rushing to him. 'We didn't want to wake you to put you in a proper bed, but you must have a fever.'

He knows he doesn't have a fever. It would be all too easy to be sick! They can stick all the thermometers they like in his mouth or up his backside.

Snow is falling, thick and silent, so thick that it is barely possible to make out the windows of the building opposite. Even in the kitchen, the quality of the air has changed.

'Why won't you ever let anyone look after you?'

He doesn't even reply.

'Come with me, Frank.'

Since he is up and has his dressing gown on, she takes him into the salon, where the carpet has been half rolled up – they were in the middle of doing the housework – and closes all the doors.

'I'm not going to tell you off. You know I never have. All I ask is that you listen to me. Believe me, Frank, it's best if you don't show your face outside today, or maybe for the next few days. I sent Bertha to do the shopping. They almost refused to serve her.'

He isn't listening. She understands the look he throws in the direction of the Holsts' apartment. She hastens to reassure him.

'It's probably nothing serious.'

Does she think he is in love, or that he feels remorse?

'The doctor came by this morning. He sent for oxygen bottles. She caught a chill. Her father . . .'

Well? What's she waiting for?

'Her father . . .?'

'He won't leave her. The tenants clubbed together to bring them a little coal.'

They themselves have two tons of it in the cellar, but nobody will accept any of their coal.

'When she's feeling better, people will forget all about it. Even if it turns out to be pneumonia, which they're saying it might, it never lasts more than three weeks. Listen to me, Frank. Listen to me seriously, for once. I'm your mother.'

'For God's sake!'

'This evening, or better still tonight, since you have a document you chose not to tell me about but everyone has seen . . .'

The green card! She is impressed by that, too. She procures barely nubile girls for occupying officers, but she is shocked because her son has that

famous green card! . . . Still, since he has one, he might as well take advantage of it.

‘You’d do best to leave for a few days and not show your face in the neighbourhood. It’s happened before, a few times. You have friends. You have money. If you don’t have enough, I’ll give you some.’

Why does she say that, when Minna must have told her about the big wad of banknotes he has in his pocket? She probably had a look at it herself while he was asleep. That also gets her in a panic. There is too much of it. You don’t get hold of so much money in one go except by doing something dangerous.

‘If you prefer, I’ll find you a quiet room somewhere. The friend I went out with yesterday has a room I can use whenever I like. She’d be happy to have you. I’ll come and see you there, I’ll look after you. You need rest.’

‘No!’

He won’t leave the house. He knows perfectly well what his mother has in mind. He has gone too far, and now she’s panicking, that’s the truth of it. When she was happily plying her trade in girls, even when officers were involved, people despised her but didn’t dare say anything. They were content to keep their distance from her, to turn their heads away when she climbed the stairs, to give her a wide berth if ever she happened to join a queue.

But now it has become more serious. There is a sentimental element that has got the tenants worked up: there is a young girl who is sick, who might die and, to top it all, is poor.

Lotte is scared, that’s the long and the short of it.

And Lotte, who is so friendly towards someone like Otto, towards officers who have had dozens of people shot or tortured, is angry with him for getting that green card she herself has never dared dream of.

If only he hadn’t shown it to anyone!

The whole building is against them. Their victim is on their very doorstep. To make matters worse, emotions have been high since the previous day’s search of the violinist’s apartment. It is already claimed the policemen struck his mother with their rifle butts to keep her quiet.

Even if they aren’t being directly linked to that, people are worked up. Everyone in the building will long remember that Frank, and only Frank, a mere boy, walked calmly through the police cordon – there were

housewives whose children had been left on their own, without a fire, who weren't allowed to pass – simply by showing his green card.

Lotte is scared of Holst, too.

'I beg you to listen to me, Frank.'

'No.'

Too bad for her and the girls! He will stay. He won't run away when night falls, as he is being urged to do. He won't go looking for refuge at Kromer's or with a friend of his mother.

'You always do exactly what you want, don't you?'

'Yes.'

Now more than ever. From now on, he will only do what he wants, without caring about anybody else. Lotte will have to realize that, and so will the others.

'At least get dressed. Someone might come.'

But the person who shows up at their door soon afterwards, just before midday, is not a client but Chief Inspector Kurt Hamling, as cold and polite as ever, with that same air of simply paying a neighbourly visit. Frank is in the shower when he comes in, but as usual in the morning, the doors are open and it is possible to hear everything that is being said.

Among other things, his mother's traditional question:

'Won't you take off your galoshes?'

Today, that wouldn't be a luxury. It is snowing heavily, and soon there will be a pool of mud on the carpet at the foot of the armchair in which Hamling is sitting.

'Thanks. I was just passing and thought I'd drop in.'

'A little something to drink?'

He never says yes, but accepts tacitly. 'It's turned milder. In a day or two the sky will clear.'

It is unclear which sky he is referring to, but Frank isn't afraid of him. He puts on his bathrobe and deliberately comes into the salon.

'Well, well! I didn't expect to find your Frank here.'

'Why not?' Frank asks aggressively.

'I was told you were in the country.'

'Me?'

'People say all kinds of things, you know. And we're obliged to listen, because it's our job. Fortunately, we listen with only half an ear, otherwise we'd end up arresting everyone.'

‘It’s a pity!’

‘What is?’

‘That you listen with only half an ear.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’d like to be arrested. Especially by you!’

‘Frank!’ Lotte protests. ‘You know perfectly well they can’t arrest you!’ She seems really scared now, because she adds, with a defiant glance at the chief inspector, ‘With the papers you have!’

‘Precisely,’ he insists.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just like I said.’

He pours the drinks and clinks glasses with Kurt Hamling. It is as if they are both thinking about the door opposite.

‘Your health, inspector.’

‘And yours, young man.’ Why does he harp on the same idea? ‘I really thought you were in the country.’

‘I never had any intention of going there.’

‘It’s a pity. Your mother’s a good woman, all things considered.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘I know what I’m talking about. Your mother’s a fine woman, and you’d be wrong to doubt it.’

‘Oh, you know,’ Frank says with a laugh, ‘there’s a lot that I doubt!’

Poor Lotte, signalling to him in vain to be quiet! This is all beyond her. They seem to be having a go at each other over her head, and although she still doesn’t understand, she is intuitive enough to realize that it’s some kind of declaration of war.

‘How old are you, my boy?’

‘Even though I’m not your boy, I’ll answer your question. I’m eighteen, nearly nineteen. But allow me to ask *you* a question. You’re a chief inspector, aren’t you?’

‘That’s my official title.’

‘And how long have you been a chief inspector?’

‘I was appointed six years ago.’

‘How long have you been in the police?’

‘Next June will make twenty-eight years.’

‘You see? I could be your son. You deserve my respect. Twenty-eight years doing the same job. That’s a long time, Mr Hamling.’

Lotte is about to open her mouth, to order her son to be quiet, because he has overstepped the mark, and things are sure to take a turn for the worse. But Frank refills the glasses politely and holds one out to the inspector.

‘Your health!’

‘And yours!’

‘To your twenty-eight years of good and loyal service.’

They have pushed things really far. It is hard to sustain this tone for long, but it is even harder to turn back.

‘Prosit!’

‘Prosit!’

It is Kurt Hamling who beats a retreat.

‘My dear Lotte, I really must go, I’m sure there are lots of people waiting for me in my office. Look after this boy.’

He leaves, with his thick back and square shoulders, and his wide galoshes leave wet prints on every step of the stairs.

He doesn’t realize that he has just rendered Frank the greatest service he could: it has been some minutes now since Frank last thought about the cat!

3.

It was on the Thursday that the scene with Bertha took place. It was almost midday, and Frank was still asleep, having got home at about four in the morning. It was the third time since Sunday. And the fact that he had stayed in bed so late that their work was thrown into disarray might have been partly responsible for the argument. He didn't think of finding out after the event.

He had drunk a lot. He had taken it into his head to show two couples he didn't know around the nightclubs, paying for their drinks himself, each time taking the big wad of banknotes from his pocket. When a patrol had stopped them, because they were singing in the street, he had flashed his green card, and they had been allowed to go on their way.

There was a new girl in the house, a girl they hadn't had to go looking for, because she had shown up of her own accord, looking calm and confident. Her name was Anny.

'Have you worked before?' Lotte asked her, looking her up and down.

'You mean, have I made love? You can rest easy on that score. I've had more than my fair share.'

And when Lotte had questioned her about her family, she had replied, 'What do you want me to tell you? That I'm the daughter of a high-ranking officer or a well-placed official? Even if I do have a family somewhere, they won't bother you, I promise.'

Compared with the others, all the others they had had, she had the air of a thoroughbred. And yet she was very short, slim and plump at the same time, with brown hair and flawless golden skin. She was like a piece of silverware. She wasn't even eighteen, and she was already a nasty piece of work.

When she saw the others washing the dishes, for example, she went and sat down in the salon and started reading one of the magazines she had brought with her. She did the same that evening, and the following morning

declared to Lotte, 'I don't suppose you're expecting me to work as a maid on top of everything else?'

Minna had gone back to work, even though it still hurt. But it was almost always the new girl the clients chose. It was curious, though. Frank had climbed up on the table, intrigued. She managed to maintain a surprisingly dignified manner. It was the men who seemed to be demeaning themselves, to show themselves in a bad or ridiculous light. Frank guessed the words she uttered unsmilingly, unemotionally, with a kind of high-handed indifference.

'Do you want me to turn round? Higher? Lower? There you are. What now?'

While they worked on her, she would look up at the ceiling with her beautiful eyes, like those of an unfettered animal. That was how her eyes met Frank's. She must have been able to see him vaguely through the glass. For a while, he wondered if she really had seen him, because she didn't give a start, expressed no surprise; she continued to wait for the man to satisfy himself, all the while thinking of something else.

'Is it the boss who asks you to watch?' she asked some time later.

'No.'

'Are you a pervert?'

'No.'

She shrugged. Because of her, Minna and Bertha were sleeping in the same bed, and Frank had regained possession of his camp bed in the kitchen. On the Tuesday evening, he got into bed with Anny, and she declared:

'If you want to know what I'm like, hurry up about it. I suppose I have to do it with the boss's son, but don't think you're going to spend the night in my bed. I hate sleeping next to someone.'

Minna had tried to make friends with her, but she spent all her time reading. As for Bertha, she was increasingly reduced to the role of servant and avoided saying anything to the new girl, serving her grudgingly – because Anny expected to be served. She even had to be helped to wash and dry her hair.

Frank was sleeping when the argument started. As happened every morning, his bed – with him in it – had been pushed into the back room. Much later, he heard raised voices and recognized Bertha's accent. He had

never before seen her in a temper, nor were the words she was coming out with part of her usual vocabulary, which was reserved and respectable.

‘I’ve had enough of this dump. I’m not staying a day longer. With all the mucky business that goes on here, it’s not going to last anyway, and I’d prefer to be somewhere else when things turn nasty.’

‘Bertha,’ Lotte said in a sharp voice, ‘why don’t you just shut up?’

‘Yell as loudly as you like, why don’t you? But I wouldn’t advise it. There are enough people in this building who take an interest in you and would kill you if they dared!’

‘Bertha, I order you—’

‘Go on, order me! Just yesterday, in the market, a boy no taller than this spat in my face, and it wasn’t because of me, it was because of you. I wonder what’s stopping me from doing the same to you!’

Would she have done it? Probably not. She was the kind of girl who allowed her resentments to build up over a long time, and now that it was all coming out, there was a whole stream of them. She hadn’t seen Frank come into the kitchen behind her, barefoot and in his pyjamas. So she was stunned, just as she was looking at Lotte and talking about spitting, to suddenly get a slap from somewhere she didn’t even know anybody was standing.

When she recognized Frank, she clenched her jaws. ‘Is that you, you brat? Just do that again and I’ll—’

Lotte didn’t have time to intervene. Two more slaps rang out as clearly as whips at the circus. As a result, Bertha, red-faced, threw herself on him, clutching at him as best she could, while he made an effort to keep her at a distance.

‘Bertha! Frank!’

Minna had taken refuge in the salon, while Anny, smoking a cigarette in a long ivory holder, had leaned back against the doorframe to watch the match.

‘A little brat, yes, that’s what you are! A lowlife who thinks he can do whatever he likes just because his mother runs a brothel! He does stuff so filthy he’d make even a hardened whore blush! Let go of me! Let go of me, or I’ll scream as loud as I can and bring out the neighbours! It’ll take more than your revolver or your bloody papers to get rid of them once they come after you!’

‘Frank!’

He let go. His scratched cheek was bleeding a little.

‘Just wait until they’ve got you in a corner, which won’t be long now! There won’t always be foreign soldiers in the country to protect you, you and people like you!’

‘Just come and settle your account, Bertha.’

‘I’ll go in my own good time, madam. Just see how you like it tomorrow morning, when there’s nobody to make your coffee or empty your chamber pots! When I think I had to bring you pork from my parents!’

‘Come on, Bertha.’

She turned one last time to Frank, eyes shining, and spat at him by way of farewell. ‘Coward! Dirty little coward!’

And yet she had been the tenderest among them when he had slept with her, a tenderness that was quite motherly.

Most likely, Bertha will say nothing. Lotte is worried, but she ought to be thinking she has seen it all before. There have been lots of scenes like that, and there have never been any consequences. As Bertha went downstairs with her belongings, Lotte tried to listen out, anxious to know if she would talk to some of the tenants or the caretaker. It was unlikely, because Bertha is looked down on as much as they are. Wasn’t it her the boy spat at? It is still her that people would pick on most easily.

There she is, waiting for a tram on the corner of the street, maybe already regretting what she has done.

Lotte regrets it even more. Bertha may not have exactly excited the men, but she managed to satisfy them in the end all the same, and the one big advantage, with her, was that she did almost all the housework.

Minna will take over, but she is not strong, and her insides still hurt. As for Anny, the most they can expect from her is that she might make her own bed in the morning.

And then there is the shopping, the queues, where you inevitably find yourself in contact with local people, sometimes with tenants from this building.

‘You shouldn’t have slapped her . . . Well, what’s done is done!’

She looks at her son’s pale complexion and the dark rings under his eyes. Frank has never drunk as much as now, has never gone out as much without saying where he is going, with that hard look in his eyes and always with his loaded revolver in his pocket.

‘Do you think it’s wise to go around with that thing on you?’

He doesn’t bother to answer, or even to shrug. He has got into a new habit that is quickly becoming a mannerism: the habit of looking at people who talk to him as if he doesn’t see them and carrying on as if he hasn’t heard a word.

Not once has he been lucky enough to meet Holst on the stairs, even though he goes up and down them five or six times a day, much more frequently than in normal circumstances. It is likely that Holst has asked the tram company for leave so that he can look after his daughter. Frank thought he would be obliged to go out, even if only to buy medicines or food. But they have made other arrangements. Old Wimmer knocks at his neighbours’ door in the morning, and it is he who takes care of their shopping. One time when the door was left ajar, Frank spotted him in a woman’s apron, doing the housework.

The doctor comes once a day, around two o’clock. Frank makes sure he is standing in his way when he comes out. He is quite a young man, who looks more like an athlete. He doesn’t seem worried. Of course, it’s not his daughter, or his wife. Could Holst be ill, too? Frank has thought of that. Then, on Wednesday, as he was about to get on the tram, he turned mechanically towards the window and saw him in the gap between the curtains. Their eyes met from a distance, Frank is sure of it. Nothing could happen, obviously, but all the same Frank was quite shaken by that first contact. They both remained calm and grave, without hatred, with nothing but a great void between them.

His mother would be more worried if she learned that every day, sometimes twice a day, he deliberately went into the little café near the tram stop, the one where you go down a step. It verges on provocation, because he has no business there. The regulars fall silent as soon as he enters and conspicuously start looking elsewhere. The owner, Mr Kamp, who is almost always sitting at a table with them – they often play cards – reluctantly stands up to go and serve him.

On the Monday, Frank paid with a very large note which he extracted from his wad.

‘I’m sorry,’ Mr Kamp said, pushing it away, ‘I can’t change that.’

Frank left the note on the counter, simply saying as he left, ‘Keep the change!’

On the Tuesday, he could have sworn that the regulars were expecting him, and he felt a little thrill. It happens often now. One fine day, something is bound to happen; it is impossible to predict when, or even what exactly. It can just as easily happen in this quiet, old-fashioned little café. Why did the customers look at Mr Kamp with a knowing air, with barely contained smiles?

Kamp served him without a word, then, as Frank was about to pay, he took an envelope that was in full view on the shelf, between two bottles, and handed it to him.

Just from the touch, Frank recognized banknotes and small change. It was the change from the previous day's large note.

He said thank you and left. That won't stop him from going back.

And he almost quarrelled with Timo. It was two o'clock in the morning. He had been drinking a lot. In a corner, in the company of a woman, he saw a man whose face he didn't like. Frank, who was at the bar, showed Timo his revolver and said, 'When that guy leaves, I'm going to kill him!'

Timo looked at him harshly, without the slightest friendliness.

'Are you crazy or what?'

'I'm not crazy. I don't like his face. I'm going to kill him.'

'Take care, or I'll kill you with a punch to the face.'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying I don't like the way you're starting to behave. Go and amuse yourself somewhere else if you like, but not in my place. I warn you that if you touch that guy, I'll have you arrested immediately. And another thing. Either you leave your toy someplace else, or you don't come in here. Now, my advice to you is to stop drinking so much. It makes you show off. Act your age.'

But then, a little while later, Timo came and apologized to him. This time, he tried to reason with him.

'I may have come on a bit strong just now, but it's for your own good. Even your friend Kromer thinks you're becoming a danger. I don't want to know anything about your business. All I know is that for a while now you've assumed you're home and dry. Do you think it's clever to show your wads of banknotes to just anybody? Do you imagine people don't know how you get that kind of money?'

Frank showed him his green card. Timo didn't seem impressed. Embarrassed, at best. He made him put it back in his pocket.

‘That’s another thing it’s best not to show around too much.’

Later, he went back on the attack a third time. With Timo, conversations happen in several instalments, because customers are constantly calling him from all sides.

‘Listen, son. I know you’re going to say it’s jealousy on my part, but at least I’ll have done what I have to do. I’m not claiming documents like that are worthless. Only, there’s a way to use them. Plus, there are more complicated things . . .’

He had no desire to explain himself.

‘What, for example?’

‘What’s the point talking about them? People always say too much. I’m on good terms with them. They leave me alone. Some of them bring me merchandise and they never cheat. But maybe because I see a lot of them, and all sorts, there are things I’ve figured out.’

‘What kind of things?’

‘Let me give you an example. About a month ago, sitting there at the third table, there was a high-ranking officer, a colonel, a handsome-looking man, still young, ruddy-faced, chest covered in decorations. He had two women with him, and I don’t know what he was telling them, I was otherwise engaged, but they were laughing very loudly. After a while, he took out his wallet, presumably intending to pay. The women grabbed hold of it and started playing with it. All three of them were drunk. They passed around papers and photographs. I was at the bar. It was then that I saw a guy get up, someone I hadn’t paid any attention to, an ordinary-looking fellow, in plain clothes, the kind you meet all the time in the street. He wasn’t even well dressed. He went up to the table, and the colonel looked at him. He seemed annoyed, though he tried to smile. The other man said one word to him, just one, and the colonel sprang to his feet and saluted. He took his wallet back from the women. He paid. You’d have sworn you’d just seen him deflate. He left his girlfriends in the lurch, without any explanation, and went out with the plain clothes guy.’

‘What’s this got to do with me?’ Frank muttered.

‘Apparently the next day he was seen at the railway station, leaving for an unknown destination. That’s what it means. There are people who seem powerful, and maybe they are at that moment. But mark my words, never as much as they like to make out, because however powerful they are, there

are always people more powerful than them. And those people are people we don't usually know.

'You work in an office where everyone shakes your hand, and you think you're all set. Only, at the same time, in another office that has nothing to do with the first one, they're putting together a file on you.'

'You want to know what I really think? They have several sectors. And just because you're on good terms with one sector doesn't mean you can take risks in another.'

Frank remembered this conversation the following morning, and it was all the more troubling in that he had a hangover. It's becoming a habit. Every morning, he vows to be careful, but he immediately starts again, precisely because he needs a drink to pick himself up.

What hits him is a connection that establishes itself in his mind between Timo's words and something Lotte said once, which he didn't pay any attention to at the time.

'You can tell it's nearly Christmas. *The faces are starting to change.*'

Which means that her clientele is changing, at least as far as the occupiers are concerned. It is always a difficult time for her, because it is so unsettling. Every three months, or every six months – it usually coincides with the major holidays of the year, but that may only be chance – staff get transferred, both civilian and military. Some go back to their country, and others arrive from there, and the ones who arrive don't behave in the same way. You don't know what kind of people they are, and everything has to start all over again. Every time a new man rings the bell, Lotte thinks she is obliged to pretend that it really is a manicure salon, and she doesn't breathe easily until the client mentions the name of the colleague who sent him.

Without quite knowing why, Frank doesn't want his general to go. He calls him his general even though he doesn't know him and has never seen him. Kromer is the one who knows him. There is something innocent, something reassuring about his passion for watches. Frank is like his mother. He feels more at ease with people who have a passion. For example, when you know Otto's vices, it is no longer possible to be afraid of him. As it happens, he is someone who may be of use to Frank one day. He would surely pay a lot to make sure that some of the things he does didn't come out into the open.

They have seen the sun again, and the ground is freezing over nicely. The last snow that fell hasn't yet had time to get dirty, and, in some

neighbourhoods, the unemployed people hired by the municipal authorities are still busy making dazzling heaps along the pavements.

He has the impression Kromer is avoiding him. But then Frank is also avoiding Kromer. So what is he worried about? Why even say he is worried when he is perfectly calm, when he is the one who, of his own free will, knowing exactly what he is up to, is doing everything he can to attract bad luck?

Going to Kamp's, for example. There must be people from the networks and the patriotic leagues among the customers in the little café. There certainly are in the queues, which he passes knowing full well that the mere sight of his clothes and shoes is a provocation.

He has twice run into Carl Adler, the driver of the van that took him to the village the night he killed Miss Vilmos. It's strange: twice in four days, by chance, both times in unexpected places: the first time on the pavement opposite the Lido; the second in a tobacconist's in the upper town.

Yet he had never come across him before. Of course, he didn't know him before, so he might have passed him a hundred times without noticing him.

That's how to get ideas in your head!

Was it deliberately, out of caution or out of a kind of integrity, that Adler pretended not to know him?

None of this matters. Even if it did, even if there was some trickery behind it, Frank would be delighted. All the same, there is one thing that bothers him. The time he met him opposite the cinema, Adler wasn't alone. He had with him a man who lives in his – Frank's – building.

It was someone he has only ever glimpsed on the stairs. He knows he lives on the second floor, on the left, and that he has a wife and a little daughter. He must be about twenty-eight or thirty. He is a thin, unhealthy-looking young man, with hair on his chin that's too blond and not long enough to be a beard. He isn't a manual worker. A clerk? Maybe. Actually, no, because Frank notices he doesn't run into him at fixed hours but at any time of the day. Nor does he look like a travelling salesman.

He is probably a technician, like Adler. If that's the case, it isn't surprising they know each other.

You never know who belongs to a network or a league. It is often the most apparently inoffensive people, and the fair-haired man on the second floor, with his wife and little girl, is the very type of tenant that nobody takes any notice of.

Why would these people execute him? He hasn't done anything to them. In fact, most of the people they kill are their own members who have betrayed them, and Frank can't betray them since he doesn't know them. That they despise him is for sure. But, just like his mother, he has much more to fear from the anger of the neighbours, which is based on envy, which is just a matter of coal, warm clothes and supplies of food.

In fact, it is only the neighbourhood that Lotte is afraid of. Since Frank has been left alone up until now, she realizes he won't be bothered because of Miss Vilmos. Even Kurt Hamling's attitude, the little phrases he came out with, suggest the danger is only local. Otherwise, there would be no reason to advise Frank to spend a few days in the country or with friends.

He hasn't managed to run into Holst, as he would have liked, but they have seen each other from a distance. Holst, who must know his footsteps by now, just as Frank knows his, hears him come in and out ten times a day and could tackle him on the landing.

Frank isn't afraid. It's not a matter of fear. It's infinitely more subtle than that. It's a game he's made up, just as, when he was a child, he made up games only he understood. It happened most often in the morning, in his bed, while Mrs Porse was making breakfast, and ideally when it was sunny. With his eyes closed, he would think, for example, 'Fly!' Then he would half open his eyes, looking only at a specific portion of the wallpaper. If there was a fly on it, he had won.

Now he could have said, 'Fate!' Because he wanted fate to take an interest in him; he had done everything to force its hand and he continued to defy it from morning to night. The previous day he had said to Kromer, casually:

'Ask your general if there's anything else he'd like apart from watches.'

He didn't need money. Even at the rate he was going, he had enough for a few months. He didn't need anything. He had bought himself an overcoat that was even louder than the last one, the kind of overcoat of which there probably aren't even five in the whole town, a light-beige genuine camelhair coat. It wasn't quite thick enough for the season, but he wore it out of bravado. Just as he always carried his revolver in his pocket, even though it weighed heavily on him and might still get him into trouble in spite of his green card.

He had no desire to become a martyr, or even a mere victim. But it was good to think, whenever he walked through his neighbourhood, especially

at night, that a shot might suddenly be fired at him from a shadowy corner.

Nobody was bothering with him. Even Holst didn't seem interested in him, and yet Frank had done enough to attract his attention.

Sissy must hate him. Anyone in Frank's place would have moved out of the building after what had happened.

Fate was lying in wait for him somewhere. But where? Instead of waiting for it to manifest itself when the time was right, Frank was courting it, searching everywhere for it. It was as if he was shouting, just as he had when he held the bag with the key at arm's length on the stretch of waste ground, 'I'm here! What are you waiting for?'

He didn't have enough enemies and he was trying his best to create them. Wasn't that why he had slapped Bertha? And now, when Minna ventured to be nice to him, or simply kind, he would reply, in order to hurt her:

'I hate women who have something wrong with their insides.'

He brought chocolates for Anny, who would never think of offering any to the others, or even of saying thank you. He loved looking at her. He could have looked at her body for hours, but it didn't satisfy him to make love with her. Nor did she have any desire for it. The second time he had climbed into bed with her, she had sighed sullenly and said, 'Again?'

Her body was a work of art, but all she had was her body. And even that was somehow lifeless, without vibration. She would place it the way you wanted it, how you wanted it, with the air of saying, 'Look at it, caress it, do what you have to do, but hurry up about it!'

It was on the Thursday that Bertha left. On the Friday, at 3.30 in the afternoon, he was in the street when he spotted the tenant from the second floor standing by a shop window. It was only later that it occurred to him that it was a window displaying corsets. At least an hour had gone by. He had gone with a casual acquaintance named Kropetzki to eat cakes at Taste's. Ressler, the editor, was there. It is the kind of place Ressler feels at home in, the refined setting that suits him, and Frank has rarely seen a woman so sleek and well dressed as the one who was with him.

Ressler favoured him with a little wave of the hand. Frank and his friend listened to the music, because Taste's is the only place where, from five in the afternoon, they still play palm court music. That reminded him of the violinist, because there was a tall, thin violinist among the musicians.

Has he been shot? People always get scared, but most often you see those you thought were dead come back home one fine day. Some claim they

have been tortured, but it is rare. Unless the others, those who say nothing, keep silent out of caution?

The idea of torture chills the blood in his veins, and yet, when it comes down to it, torture wouldn't scare him. Would he hold out? He is convinced he would. It is something that has often occurred to him, a thought that is familiar. Even before it became part of life. When he was little, he used to have fun hurting himself, in front of the mirror, sticking a pin in his skin, for example, and watching his facial reactions.

They won't torture him. They won't dare. The others also use torture, at least so they say.

Why would they torture him anyway? He can't tell them anything.

In a few days, it'll be Christmas. A false Christmas, once again. Except when he was a small child, all he has ever known are false Christmases. Sometimes, when he was seven or eight, he came to town at this time of the year, and the streets were more brightly lit than a ballroom; men in thick coats and women in furs thronged the pavements, and the windows were so full of goods that they seemed on the verge of collapsing into the street.

They'll put up a little tree in the salon at Lotte's, like the other years. It's more for the clients. Who will stay? Minna must have family. Even when the girls don't bother about them the rest of the year, they remember when it comes to the holidays. As for Anny, they don't know where she is from. Maybe she'll stay? Quite likely she'll be content to stuff herself, then plunge back into her magazines.

Even Kromer goes home, some thirty kilometres away, for Christmas!

Sissy will still be in her bed. Holst will spend his last few pennies, if he has any left, or will sell a few books, in order to decorate a tree for her. They will ask old Wimmer to stay – he has found his vocation and has become their maid of all work.

'What are you thinking about?' his friend asks.

He gives a start. 'Me?'

'No, the Pope.'

'Nothing. I'm sorry.'

'You looked as if you wanted to strangle the musicians.'

Really? He wasn't even looking at them. He had forgotten all about them.

'Actually, I'd like to ask you a favour, but I don't dare.'

'How much?'

‘It’s not what you think. It isn’t for me. It’s for my sister. She’s been needing an operation for a long time. I was told you have lots of money.’

‘What’s the matter with your sister?’

She hasn’t even worked at Lotte’s, Frank thinks ironically.

‘It’s her eyes. If they don’t operate, she’ll go blind.’

He is the same age as Frank, but weak, timid, born to be squashed. Tears have immediately welled in his eyes.

‘How much does she need?’

‘I don’t know exactly, but I think if you could lend me—’

Frank flourishes the wad of banknotes like a conjurer. It has become a game. ‘If you say thank you, you’re even more stupid than I thought.’

‘Frank, my friend—’

‘Didn’t you hear what I said? Let’s get out of here!’

Is it a coincidence that the man from the second floor is a little way along the street, still standing in front of a shop window, but this time a window full of dolls? He has a little girl. Christmas is coming. He could argue that it is quite natural for him to be looking at the window displays.

What if Frank went up to him and asked him straight out what he wants, if necessary waving his green card or his revolver at him?

The fact is, what Timo told him has made an impression on him. He continues on his way, then turns. The man isn’t following him. There is only Kropetzki sticking to his heels, and he has a lot of difficulty getting rid of him.

If fate is lying in wait for him, it won’t show itself tonight, since he is able to have dinner, meet Kromer – preoccupied and a bit distant – drink in three different clubs and argue with a stranger at a bar for a long time without anything happening.

From Timo’s to home, passing the alley by the tannery, nothing happens either. It would be funny if fate chose that very spot to be lying in ambush! It is the kind of thing you think about at three in the morning, when you’ve drunk a lot.

There is light in the Holsts’ apartment. Maybe it is the hour for the compresses, or the drops, or God knows what other kind of treatment? He listens at the door. They must have heard his footsteps. Holst knows he is on the landing, and Frank deliberately stands there for a while, sticking his ear against the wood.

Holst doesn’t open, doesn’t react.

Idiot!

There is nothing for it now but to go to bed and, if he wasn't so tired, he would make love with Anny, just to upset her. As for Minna, she disgusts him. She is stupidly in love. She probably cries when she thinks about him. Maybe she prays. And she is ashamed of her insides!

He goes to bed alone. There is still a bit of fire in the stove, and he stares for quite a long time at the pink disc through which the poker is pushed.

Idiot!

And it's in the morning, when he is once again hung over, that it happens. He has been looking for fate everywhere, and it hasn't been in any of the places he figured it might be.

More chance: there is nothing left to drink in the house, the two decanters are empty; Lotte should have told him days ago that they need to stock up, but she forgot.

He will have to go to Timo's. For those things, it is best to see him in the morning. Timo doesn't like selling, even at a high price. He claims you always lose on it, that good bottles are worth more than lousy money.

Frank is thirsty. Lotte's hair is in curlers. She has put on a loose light-coloured blouse to do the housework with Minna. Anny doesn't react when they sweep between her legs. There she is, impassive as a goddess, engrossed, not in daydreaming or contemplation, but in reading her magazine. She lets ash fall from her cigarette on to the floor.

'Don't buy too much in one go, Frank.'

It's strange. He was on the point of leaving his revolver in the apartment, not because of what Timo said, but because it seemed to him like cheating.

He doesn't want to cheat.

He met Mr Wimmer climbing the stairs with provisions, a string bag in which there was a cabbage and some swedes, and Mr Wimmer didn't react, passing very close to him without saying a word.

Idiot!

He remembers that he stopped on the second-floor landing to light his first cigarette – it has a nasty taste, like always when he has drunk too much the previous night – and that he looked mechanically into the left-hand corridor. He saw nothing. The corridor is empty, with a child's pram right at the end. A baby can be heard crying.

He gets to the ground floor and is about to pass the caretaker's lodge. Just then, the door opens.

He has never thought it could happen like this. To tell the truth, he doesn't even realize something is happening.

The caretaker looks the same as usual, with his cap on his head. Next to him is a nondescript man who looks vaguely like a foreigner and who is wearing an overcoat that is too long for him.

Just as Frank passes, the foreigner touches the brim of his hat, as if to thank the caretaker, follows Frank out and catches up with him before he has reached the middle of the pavement.

'If you wouldn't mind following me.'

As simple as that. He has shown him an object in the hollow of his hand, a card protected by cellophane, with a photograph and some stamps. What kind of card? Frank has no idea.

'All right,' Frank says, very calmly if a little stiffly.

'Give me that.'

He doesn't have time to wonder what he is supposed to give: the man has immediately plunged his hand into Frank's right-hand pocket and grabbed hold of the revolver, which he slips into his own overcoat.

If anyone is watching them right now – Frank has no idea if there is – they probably wouldn't understand.

And there is no car waiting at the kerb. They walk side by side to the tram stop. They wait for the tram, like anybody else, without even looking at each other.

4.

It's the eighteenth day. He's holding out. He will hold out. He's discovered that it's all a matter of holding out, and that if he does he'll get one over on them. Is it really about getting one over on them? That's another problem, one that he will solve when the time comes. He has done a lot of thinking. Too much. Thinking can be dangerous, too. You have to be very strict with yourself. Thinking that he'll get one over on them simply means that he will get out of this. And the expression 'get out of this' doesn't just refer to the place where he is.

It's amazing the way people outside use words without thinking about their real meaning. He may not be very educated, but there are lots like him, they are in the majority, and he realizes now that he has always been content to use words approximately.

This question of the meaning of words took him two days. He might come back to it.

Anyway, it's the eighteenth day, and that's something he's absolutely certain of. He's made sure it's something he's absolutely certain of. He's chosen an almost empty portion of wall and every morning he draws a line with his thumbnail. It's more difficult than you might think. Not drawing the line, even though his nail is already quite worn down. But drawing only one. Making sure you have drawn it. The wall is covered in plaster, which makes it easier. What wasn't easy was finding a clean spot, because of all the others who have been here before him.

Nor – and this is another of his discoveries – must you start having qualms, questioning everything, because here there is a tendency to doubt, and he has realized that once you start doubting, you're lost.

He will get to the bottom of the problem all by himself, provided he is disciplined, provided he doesn't allow himself to start daydreaming. You have to become strict about certain things. For example, the last morning he spent outside, he didn't know the date. He knew it without knowing it. He

isn't sure of it. So that, even if he can guarantee that he has been here for eighteen days, he wouldn't dare swear, within a day or two, to the date he arrived.

This is how you live.

More than likely it is the seventh of January. Although it could be the eighth. As far as what came before is concerned, he lacks indisputable points of reference; but here, he is prepared to swear by his lines.

If he holds out, if he doesn't let himself go, if he concentrates sufficiently – though without concentrating too much – it won't take him long to understand, and it will all be over.

That reminds him of a dream he has had several times. There are several of those, but the most obvious is the one about flight. He rises off the ground. Not in the open air, in a garden or a street, but always in a room, and in the presence of witnesses who can't fly. He says to them something like, 'Look how easy it is!' then puts his two hands flat down on the empty air and presses. The take-off is slow and painful. He has to make a real effort of will. Once he is in the air, all he has to do is make slight movements, now with his hands, now with his feet. His head brushes the ceiling. He never understands why the others are so astonished. He smiles at them condescendingly.

'It's easy, I tell you! You just have to want it!'

Well, here, it's the same. If he wants it strongly enough, he will understand. He has been placed in a difficult position. He realized from the start that you have to be careful of discrepancies.

Just one small example: his arrival . . . It was his last hours, his last minutes *outside*. Or *before*. He uses the two words indiscriminately. He ought to have an almost mathematically precise memory of those moments. And he has. He guards it preciously. But it takes constant effort. Every day, there is a risk he will change some details, as indeed he is tempted to do, and he has to force himself to go over the events one by one, to link each image to the next.

For example, it is untrue that Kamp came and stood in the doorway of his little café, or that there was laughter from inside. He was about to add that. He almost believed it. But the truth is, he didn't see anybody, anybody at all, before the tram, swaying as usual, came to a halt in front of them. They didn't look at each other to know if they should get on at the front or at the

back. It was as if the man was familiar with Frank's habits and wanted to please him, so they got on at the front.

Frank was smoking his cigarette, and the other man had almost a quarter of a cigar in his mouth. He could have thrown it away: he might have wanted to sit inside. Frank, though, except when he was little and he was made to, has never sat inside a tram. For no particular reason, it makes him nervous.

The man remained on the platform.

That particular tram, after crossing the bridge, goes through almost the whole of the upper town and ends its journey in a neighbourhood of workers' apartment houses, almost in the countryside. But although they passed close to the military offices, the man didn't get off. It wasn't until three streets further on that he motioned to Frank, and they went and waited for another tram under a yellow disc.

The sky was bright. That morning it felt as if every window, every white roof, every stretch of snow was glittering. Is his memory distorted? There is one detail that's undeniable. As they waited for the second tram, he dropped his cigarette end in the snow. Usually, the snow is hard, and covered with a crust. The tobacco should have continued burning itself down for a while. But in fact the cigarette went out, as if sucked in by the dampness of the snow in the sun. Less strictly, he would say that it made a splash as it sank into the snow.

These are the kinds of details he pays attention to, because they are points of reference. Without them, you would end up thinking all kinds of things and believing them.

The second tram they took followed a kind of circular boulevard that goes through neighbourhoods that are no longer quite the town without yet being suburbs. Several times, women carrying string shopping bags got on for a short ride; Frank even helped some of them on, and the man didn't reprimand him.

There was even a moment when he wondered if this was some kind of practical joke. Was it Kromer? Or Timo? Was Chief Inspector Kurt Hamling getting his own back?

He was right not to let anything show. He is pleased with himself in general, even now when he has had time to go over every detail with a fine-tooth comb. Others would no doubt have asked questions, or become indignant, or made vulgar jokes. Simply, in a dignified manner, he based his

behaviour on that of the man, who must be some kind of low-ranking employee, a mere inspector, without any special instructions regarding him.

They must have told him, 'Bring in this young man,' and added, 'Be careful, he's armed!'

It was out of habit that he immediately knew in which pocket Frank kept his revolver. The thing that Frank is even prouder of, as far as his own attitude is concerned, is that he didn't start nervously smoking cigarette after cigarette. When he threw one away, he would say to himself mentally, 'Two more stops before I have another one.'

They got off in a very bright neighbourhood, a new neighbourhood, which people in the town barely know, where the bricks are still pink, the paint fresh, and where, just opposite the tram stop, there were spacious buildings beyond a courtyard, with high railings.

It's a school. Most likely a high school. There is a sentry box with a guard at the gate, but there is nothing sinister about the place; just opposite, Frank noticed a little café, similar to Mr Kamp's, but newer.

'We may have to wait a while. We're early.'

Apart from the phrases he addressed to him when he came up to him in the street, these are the first words the man has uttered. He does so with a concerned air, as if afraid of being in the wrong. It occurs to Frank that, the other days, he didn't go out so early and the only reason he did so this morning was because there was nothing more to drink in the apartment.

Does Lotte already know? Or Holst? Or Sissy?

He is calm. He has been calm all the time. With all the thinking he has subsequently done about the way he acted, he is pleased with himself. There is nothing upsetting about entering the courtyard of a school, even when there is a sentry box with a guard on duty at the gate.

They turned right and climbed a few steps, the man walking in front of him, until they got to a glass door, which he opened to let Frank pass.

It is hard to say what this particular little building was before. Maybe the caretaker's lodge? There is a bench, and the room is divided in two by a desk that looks like a counter. The woodwork and the furniture are painted light grey. The man walks into an adjoining room, where he says a few words, then comes back and sits down next to Frank.

He doesn't seem any happier than Frank does. On the contrary. He is a sad man, a scrupulous man. He does his duty without joy, maybe against his own conscience. He keeps his saliva-soaked cigar end between his lips, and

it is starting to smell bad. He doesn't object when Frank stubs out his cigarette on the floor and lights another.

He is what Frank would call a loser, a guy like Kropetzki, born to be kicked. There must be more important people in the next room: the door to it remains open, but only the top part is visible, because the counter is in the way. Frank and his companion have arrived during a lull. But no sooner has he lit his cigarette than the muffled sound of a fist hitting a face is heard; this isn't followed by a groan, just the voice of the man doing the hitting, or someone else, asking, 'Well?'

Frank is sorry he can't see, but he doesn't dare stand up; he waits for more blows to follow, and they do, just once eliciting a weak moan from the person receiving them.

'Well, pig?'

Frank kept calm. He is sure of it. He has had eighteen days to think about it, which makes him all the more honest with himself.

What it aroused in him was curiosity. The first thing he asked himself was, 'Is it true they strip them naked?'

It will probably be his turn soon. Why does that make him think of Minna's insides? Because it is said they kick or knee you in your private parts. That makes him turn pale. Yet the fellow in the other room doesn't flinch. In the moments of silence, his slightly sibilant breathing is audible.

'Do you still say it wasn't you?'

A blow. After a while it is possible to tell, from the noise, the part of the body that is being hit.

An avalanche of blows this time. Then a muted groan. Then nothing.

Just a few words uttered in a reproachful tone in a foreign language.

Has all this been arranged for his benefit? He will have to find out. It's hard to believe, of course. He has stopped thinking like the people outside. But he doesn't yet think like his neighbours. He is making an effort to stay clear-headed, not to exaggerate. He is convinced he will succeed. They won't get one over on him.

Especially since it may be a test. He mustn't talk that way to Lotte, or Kromer, or even Timo. He has come a long way since he last saw them. They haven't. They continue to live their little lives, they continue to think in the same way, in such a way that they can't advance.

He feels like smiling when he remembers what Timo told him about the green card and the sectors.

Is Frank in a sector now or not?

Is it an important sector?

If Timo passed by in the street and saw the gate with its sentry, he wouldn't suspect a thing. You have to see things from the inside, and Frank is on the inside now. Will they admit that he is on the inside?

For his part, he is prepared to admit that there was some truth in what Timo said. Timo didn't know it, he was just talking off the top of his head, the way people talk outside. The green card exists. The fact that it has been created means that it has its importance. The fact that it has its importance means that it really shouldn't be wasted.

In the old days, to merely become a Freemason, as all civil servants were, you had to undergo tests.

That's what Timo hasn't understood, what neither he, nor the others, nor Frank have thought about. It isn't because of that thought that he is calm – if it was he would despise himself – but he spends a certain amount of time every day considering it, he compares things, goes deeper into certain aspects of the matter.

Why, when they admitted him to the office, didn't they do to him what they did to his predecessor? Two men took that one away, one holding him by his feet, the other by his head, because he had had what he could take, maybe more than he could take. They must have rushed it, been too hard. The chief wasn't pleased. The word he uttered in a flat voice, hitting the table with a paper knife, probably meant, 'Next!'

Frank's companion stood up and slipped his cigar end into the pocket of his waistcoat. Frank also stood up, quite naturally.

Was he convinced at that moment that he would walk free a few minutes later and catch a tram going in the opposite direction?

He is no longer quite sure. There are questions he has asked himself too often, questions that become more complicated with every day that passes. There are some he keeps for the morning and others for the afternoon, for sunrise or sunset, for before or after the soup. That is another discipline, another thing he has to be strict with himself about.

'Come!'

Did the man say 'come'? Probably not. He didn't say anything. He simply motioned to Frank to walk around the counter, or else led the way.

And then it became almost ridiculous. The chief he found himself facing didn't look like a chief at all, any more than Mr Wimmer did. He wasn't

wearing a uniform. He was dressed in grey, with a jacket that was too tight, a collar that was too high, a badly knotted tie. He seemed quite cramped in his clothes.

He was a small, middle-aged man, like those in the offices where ration cards, coal coupons and other administrative odds and ends are distributed. He was wearing spectacles with lenses as thick as magnifying glasses and seemed to be waiting with a certain impatience for his lunch hour.

There is another vital question, which goes to the heart of the matter: *Did they, or did they not, make a mistake?*

Timo seemed to be implying that they are like everyone else, that one of their offices might quite well not know what's going on in the next office. In the rations office, people who didn't ask for it have sometimes received two cards instead of one by mistake, while others can't get a lost card replaced.

It's a serious question. You mustn't let yourself get carried away, but it's necessary to consider that possibility as carefully as the others. Nor must he forget to take into account that it was lunchtime, that the chief was hungry, and that he was also in a bad mood after his previous customer had passed out.

All the same, it is impossible to deduce anything specific from his behaviour. Did he even deign to look at Frank? Did he know who he was? Did he have a file in front of him?

When Frank was waiting in the other room, on the grey bench, there must have been five of them in the office, since there were now three: the chief sitting and the two others standing, including one who was quite young, younger than Frank, and badly dressed.

So, two standing and one sitting.

Frank immediately reached out his card across the desk. He had been holding it ready for half an hour. He had fingered it in his pocket all through the tram ride. If Timo was right, the old man might have shrugged his shoulders, or laughed.

He took the card and, without so much as glancing at it, put it down next to him on a pile of papers. Meanwhile, the two others calmly, methodically searched his pockets.

Nobody said a word to him. He wasn't asked any questions. The man who had brought him in was standing in the doorway and didn't particularly seem to be keeping an eye on him.

The old man must have been thinking of something, examining a file that wasn't about him, and he let the contents of Frank's pockets, including the wad of banknotes, pile up on the corner of his desk, without showing any curiosity.

Once the search was done, he looked up as if to say, 'Are we finished?'

Remembering, the first man came and put the revolver down on the desk.

'Is that it?'

Then at last, with a slight sigh, he picked up a long form, a sheet of paper of an unusual format, with printed words and blanks to fill in.

'Frank Friedmaier?' he asked, as if it was of no importance.

He wrote the name down in block capitals, then more than a quarter of an hour went by as he entered in a special column all the objects that had been found in Frank's pockets, even down to a box of matches and a pencil stub.

They didn't beat him. Nobody took any notice of him. If he had made a dash for the door and run outside, it is likely that only the sentry would have fired at him and would probably have missed.

Is it so ridiculous to think it's a test? Why would they give a green card to people they don't know, people they aren't sure of?

Why didn't they beat him, like the other man? These things have no reason to take place in an office open to all and sundry.

He has done a lot of thinking in eighteen days. An enormous amount of thinking. Not just about that. He has had time to think about Christmas, the New Year, Minna, Anny, Bertha. They would be surprised, all of them, including Lotte, if they knew all he had discovered about them.

Not that it's easy to think, because of the neighbours. Because here, just as in Green Street, there are neighbours. Yes, indeed, Mr Holst! Yes, indeed, Mr Wimmer! The difference here is that you don't see them, and because of that you trust them even less than anywhere else.

They have been trying to get one over on him, ever since the first day, but he has been careful. He doesn't trust a thing. He is becoming the least trusting man in the world. If his mother came to see him, he would wonder if it wasn't they who sent her.

The neighbours knock on the walls, the pipes, the radiators. The heating doesn't work, but the old radiators are still there.

It mustn't be forgotten that they haven't put him in a real prison, but in a school, a high school, which, from what he has seen of it, must have been quite posh.

His neighbours immediately started sending him messages. Why?

He is shrewd enough to have worked out the layout of the place and he has come to the conclusion that he is privileged. How many of them are there to his right? At least ten, as far as he can judge. From their accents – he sometimes catches a few words as they pass along the walkway – they are mainly working-class or country people.

Probably what the newspapers call saboteurs. Real ones or false ones? Or false ones mixed in with real ones?

He won't let himself be taken in.

They didn't beat him. They were polite to him. They searched him, but according to the rules. They took everything: his cigarettes, his lighter, his wallet, his papers. They even took his tie, belt and shoelaces. All the while, the old man continued to fill in the form with an absent air, and when he had finished he held out the sheet of paper and a pen, pointed to a dotted line and said, almost without an accent:

'Sign here.'

He signed. He didn't think. He signed mechanically. He doesn't know what he signed. Was he wrong? Wasn't it, rather, a way of showing them that he has nothing to hide? It wasn't for fear of being beaten that he signed. He simply understood that it was an indispensable formality and that there would be no point in refusing.

That's another thing he has thought a lot about, and he has no regrets. The only thing he regrets is that he opened his mouth and said, 'I'd like—'

He didn't have time to say anything more. The old man made a sign with his hand, and he was taken across a second courtyard, this one paved in brick, as far as he could judge from the paths dug out of the snow. What had he been about to say? What would he have liked? A lawyer? Surely not. He isn't so naive. To get in touch with his mother? To reveal the name of the general? To inform Kromer, or Timo, or Ressler, who had remembered him at Taste's and waved at him?

It's a good thing he didn't have time to finish his sentence. You have to wean yourself from the habit of saying pointless words.

He didn't yet know that everything he saw mattered, and would matter a little bit more every day. You think: 'a school' and you have a conventional image of it. Whereas in some cases, the smallest details eventually become so precious that you feel angry with yourself for not having looked at them more closely.

A large inner courtyard, which must have struck him as all the larger because at that moment it was flooded with sunlight. There is a long, two-storey building, made of new bricks, and there are probably no inner staircases, because, just like on a boat, there are iron staircases on the outside, suspended corridors like walkways which give access to all the classrooms.

How many classrooms are there? He has no idea. He has an impression the place is huge. On the other side of the courtyard is another building, an assembly hall or a gymnasium, with tall windows like the windows of a church, slightly reminiscent of the tannery. Then there is the covered playground, part of which he has had in front of his eyes for eighteen days, with black wooden benches, desks and other school furniture piled up to the ceiling.

There may be bars on the windows, but it isn't a real prison. There are hardly any guards to be seen. He once had a brief glimpse of two soldiers armed with submachine guns in the courtyard.

It is only at night, when the floodlights come on, that it becomes a bit more impressive.

As the windows don't have shutters, the light stops you sleeping, or makes you wake with a start.

In fact, the reason there are no guards to be seen is that there must be a watchtower, complete with machine guns and bombs, up on the roof, which is where the floodlights are shone from. At certain hours, footsteps can be heard on an iron staircase that can't lead anywhere else.

In any case, one way or another, for whatever reason, he isn't being treated like an ordinary prisoner. He wasn't wrong when he observed how polite – cold but still polite – the old man with glasses was towards him.

To his right, then, there are at least ten of them, sometimes more, impossible to know for certain, because there are constant changes. On the left, there are three, maybe four, and one of them is either sick or mad.

It isn't a cell, it's a classroom. What was it used for when the place was a school? For classes that didn't contain many pupils, final-year classes, probably. For a classroom, it is small, but, for a cell, it is huge, not really suited for just one man. He finds it irksome, doesn't know where to put himself. His bed seems tiny. It is an iron bed, from the former army, with no springs and with planks as a base. They haven't given him a mattress. All he has is a coarse grey blanket that smells of disinfectant.

It disgusts him more than if it smelled of sweat or, worse still, if it was impregnated with human smells. These chemical smells make him think of a corpse. They probably only disinfect the blankets when they have been used for someone who has died. And men must have died in this room. Some inscriptions have been carefully erased. You still see hearts with initials, like on trees in the country, flags that can no longer be made out, but what most remains are the lines that have marked the days, with crossbars for the weeks.

It was hard for him to find an empty place, apart from the rest, for his own personal count, and he has already reached the third crossbar.

He doesn't reply to the messages. He has decided not to reply to them, to not even attempt to understand. During the day, a soldier walks up and down on the walkway and every now and again sticks his face up against the windows. At night, they rely on the floodlights, and the sound of boots is rarely heard.

Since night falls early, there is soon a real din; the walls and pipes echo with it. He doesn't understand any of it. All it would take would be effort and a little patience. It must be like a simplified Morse alphabet.

But he has no interest in it and never will have. He is alone. So much the better. They have done him the favour of leaving him alone, and that must mean something. Too bad if it means that his case is more serious. Anyway, he already has enough experience to doubt that.

From the room on the right, where new people are constantly brought in, others are taken out to be shot, if not every day, at least several times a week. It's the room for the run-of-the-mill cases. It's as if they come and draw from it at random, like a fish tank.

It happens just before daybreak. Do they manage to get any sleep? Often, there are those who moan or let out a great scream in the middle of the night. They are probably the young ones.

Two soldiers arrive from the courtyard, always two, and their steps echo on the iron staircase, then on the walkway. At first, Frank wondered each time if it was his turn. Now he no longer flinches. The footsteps come to a halt outside the classroom next door. Maybe, among those who are locked in it, there are some who studied in that very classroom?

Everyone breaks into a patriotic song; then, in the slowly lightening darkness, a vague glimpse of soldiers passing, preceded by two or three men.

If they are doing it deliberately, it's carefully calculated. The hour is so well chosen that Frank hasn't once been able to make out anyone's features. Just shapes. Men walking with their hands behind their backs, without hats or coats in spite of the cold. And invariably the collars of their jackets are turned up.

They must be led to a last office, because more time passes, and day is breaking by the time footsteps cross the courtyard. It happens near the covered playground. With an extra two or three metres, Frank would be able to see everything through the window, but he never sees anything but the top part of the body of the officer commanding the firing squad.

He can go back to sleep. Because they let him sleep. He doesn't know how it is in the other classrooms. Probably not the same, because there are always noises early. They leave him alone until they bring him his morning meal, an unsweetened acorn brew and a small piece of sticky bread.

That cow Bertha would be happy! But he has got used to it. He drinks to the last drop. He eats everything. He won't let himself be brought low. He has had his plan worked out from the first day.

He only allows himself to think about such and such a subject at the right time. He has a whole timetable in his head. It's sometimes hard to keep to it. Thoughts have a tendency to get mixed up. So to give himself time to relax, he stares at a black spot quite high up on the wall, where a crucifix must have hung when this place was a school.

'Bertha's a stupid whore, but it's not her.'

But as it isn't her turn yet, as it isn't the turn of Green Street, he picks up his thoughts where he left off yesterday.

Sometimes Sissy or Holst intervene. Sissy, for example, coming and picking up the bag with the key, when in reality he doesn't know if she picked it up, or even if she saw it. It doesn't matter, but it's forbidden by the rules he himself has drawn up. As for Holst, he has become Enemy Number One, so to speak. He is the one who recurs most often, with his grey felt boots, his overcoat, his tin box, his flaccid figure, but the oddest thing is that Frank is incapable of reconstructing his face. It's nothing but a smudge. More exactly an expression.

What kind of expression? If he is not careful, he would let himself think about it for minutes on end, or at any rate for too long, because there is nothing here to count the minutes – if he really had to, he would have to take his pulse to measure time.

What would you call the look they exchanged when Holst was at his window and Frank was waiting for the tram?

It doesn't have a name.

Well, Holst's expression doesn't have a name either. It's a mystery, an enigma. And for someone in Frank's position, it is not a good idea to linger over enigmas, even if it seems to do you good at the time.

Questions should be approached one by one, tirelessly, with a cool head as far as possible; the prisoner mentality is to be avoided at all cost.

There was this.

Then that happened.

Such and such a person acted in such and such a way.

Without leaving anything out, not the details, not the people.

All day he has his coat on, with the collar up, his hat on his head, and he spends most of his time sitting on the edge of the bed. His bucket is only emptied once a day, a bucket that has no lid.

Why is it another prisoner who comes to empty it? Why doesn't Frank take part in the daily exercise when at least three of his neighbours to the left do?

He has no desire to walk round and round in circles in the courtyard. He doesn't see them. He hears them. He has no desire for anything. He doesn't complain. He has never tried to make his guards feel sorry for him – they change almost every day anyway – and he doesn't moan, as others must, in order to get a cigarette, or just to take a drag on a soldier's cigarette.

There was this.

There was Frank.

Then there was this and this.

The neighbours in Green Street, Kromer, Timo, Bertha, Holst, Sissy, Mr Kamp, old Wimmer, others too, including the violinist, Carl Adler, the blond man on the second floor, and even Ressler, even Kropetzki. He mustn't leave anybody out, he doesn't have paper or pencil, but he keeps his list up to date, tirelessly, with, in the margin, anything that could be of interest, however slight . . .

There was Frank . . .

Holst's face, or rather Holst's expression, won't divert him from the task he has undertaken.

Sissy has probably recovered.

Recovered or died.

What matters is the list, to think, to forget nothing, while avoiding giving things more importance than they have.

There was Frank, son of Lotte . . .

That reminds him of the Bible, and he smiles scornfully, because it sounds like a pun. He isn't in prison to make puns.

Though of course they haven't put him in a prison, but in a school, and that must mean something.

5.

The nineteenth day.

They haven't put him in a prison, but in a school.

He automatically picks up where he left off yesterday. It is like an exercise. He has got used to it very quickly. The trigger ends up happening all by itself, and then the mechanism keeps going round and round, like in a watch. You do one thing, then another. You always perform the same actions at the same times, and as long as you pay attention, the thoughts continue to grind away.

There is nothing upsetting about the school in itself, and if there really are sectors, as Timo put it, Frank must be in an important sector, since people are shot here almost every day. What might be the most disturbing thing is that they're still ignoring him, or pretending to.

He hasn't been questioned and he is still not being questioned. He isn't being watched. If he was, he would notice. They are leaving him alone. They don't bother with his underwear, which he has been wearing for nineteen days. He hasn't been able to wash himself properly even once, because they don't give him enough water.

He doesn't feel any resentment towards them. As long as it doesn't mean a kind of contempt for him, he doesn't care. He hasn't shaved. Other people his age don't yet have much of a beard, but he started shaving when he was very young, as a game. Before, he used to shave every day. Now his beard is more than a centimetre long. It was hard at first, but it's starting to feel soft to the touch.

There is a real prison in the town, which they have taken over, of course, and which must be full. It isn't necessarily where they put the most interesting cases.

There's nothing to prove they are taking him for a ride. The guards never talk to him, but he has realized that it's because they don't know his language. The prisoners who bring him his jug of water and empty his

bucket also avoid saying anything to him. Those prisoners move around. You see some who are clean-shaven, who have hair that has been cut, which means there is a barber in the school. Why should the fact that they don't take him there, like the others, mean that they're forgetting him? Doesn't it just mean that he is in solitary confinement?

There was somebody behind all this, somebody who denounced him or something like that. He goes over the names, each person's actions, studies every possibility. He is always embarrassed to go on his bucket, in full view of the walkway through that large window. But he has stopped being ashamed of not being shaved, of his dirty underwear, of his clothes that are all crumpled from sleeping in them.

At nine, the others are taken down for their exercise. It must be a deliberate thing, making them go down so early, so that they feel the cold, especially as some of them don't have coats. Why not wait until eleven o'clock or midday, when the sun has had time to take the edge off the air?

It's none of his business, because he doesn't go down. If he did, he wouldn't get the chance soon after that to see the window.

The mechanism is in motion, the thoughts are grinding away, but they don't prevent him, from nine onwards, from starting to wait. It's nothing, less than nothing. If he was living in a real prison, there wouldn't be anything like it, because there you have to be careful to avoid any contact, however remote, with the outside world. Most likely, nobody here thought of that window. It is a real oversight not to have taken precautions, because it might have an important role to play.

Above the assembly hall or the gymnasium, on the other side of the courtyard, you sense a gap, maybe a street, maybe with low houses like most of those in the area, each with one family. Even further, much further, the back of a building rises into the sky, a building with at least three upper floors, which is almost entirely hidden by the assembly hall. Because of the cut-off corner of the roof, a window is visible, just one, right at the top, probably on the third floor, which suggests tenants who are quite poor.

Every morning, just before half past nine, a woman opens the window, wearing a dressing gown – like Lotte – and a brightly coloured scarf around her hair and shakes out blankets and rugs over the void.

From this distance, it is impossible to make out her features. From the speed with which she moves, he assumes she is young. In spite of the season, she leaves the window open for a while, while she comes and goes,

checking on something inside, pans on the boil, or maybe a baby; she must have a baby because she almost always puts things out to dry on a line hung across the window, and the items are very small.

Who knows? It's possible she sings. She must be happy. He imagines she is happy. When she closes the window again, she is at home, with the smells of her household reasserting themselves.

Today, the nineteenth day, it puts him in a bad mood that he is being disturbed at a quarter past nine, in other words, before she appears at her window. Ever since he arrived, he has waited like this for them to come and get him. He thinks about it all day long. And now, when it finally happens, he curses because they have disturbed him a quarter of an hour too early.

It is a man in plain clothes, accompanied by a soldier, who stops on the walkway outside his door. He has a brown moustache and looks like a school supervisor. Frank immediately tells himself he must be one of the two men who was beating someone up as he himself waited in the next room on the day he arrived. He is the kind of man who would calmly beat people up on command, feeling no hate, as conscientiously as a clerk doing sums in an office.

Is that why they are taking Frank downstairs? Neither the plainclothes man nor the soldier so much as glances at his room. They don't say anything. They simply motion to him to come out. The plainclothes man walks in front, and he follows, without even thinking of looking in the other classrooms as he promised himself he would. There is something better than that. It is the hour when the prisoners are exercising in the courtyard. He sees them, both as he goes along the walkway and when he descends the outside staircase.

He forgets to watch them. All he will remember is a kind of long dark line, like a snake. They are in single file, with about a metre's distance between them, and they form an almost closed oval, with a few undulations.

What will it mean if they beat him? That they have made a mistake, that they suspect him of crimes he hasn't committed – because they don't care about Miss Vilmos. The curious thing is that he has forgotten about the sergeant; that seems to him so venial, he doesn't feel at all guilty.

They take him to the little building where he was received the first day, and he climbs the same steps. This time, they don't keep him waiting. He is admitted immediately to the old man's office. The old man is in his place, and when Frank looks around he sees his mother.

His first reflex is to frown. Before taking a closer look at her, or saying anything to her, he waits for the old man's instructions. But the old man is as indifferent as ever. He is writing something in his cramped handwriting, and it is Lotte who's the first to speak. Her voice takes a while to find its normal register. It is too flat, like when you speak in an empty cave.

'You see, Frank, these gentlemen have authorized me to come and see you and bring you some things. I didn't know where you were.'

She utters these last words very quickly. She must have been given her instructions. There are probably subjects she is allowed to talk about and others that are forbidden.

Why does he seem to be giving her the cold shoulder? Basically, he doesn't feel comfortable. He doesn't feel trusting. She has come from elsewhere. She is too much herself. It is incredible how much herself she is. He recognizes the smell of her powder. She has put rouge on her cheeks, as she does every time she goes out. She is wearing her white hat with the half-veil that hides her eyes a little, out of self-consciousness, because of her tiny wrinkles, her onion peels she calls them, talking about her eyelids. She must have spent at least half an hour in front of the mirror in the big bedroom. It is easy to imagine her pulling on her glazed leather gloves and fluffing up her hair on both sides of her hat.

'I can't stay long, Frank.'

They have limited her visiting time. Why doesn't she just come out and say it?

'You look well. If you only knew how happy I am to see you looking so well!'

That means: 'To see that you're alive.'

Because she must have thought he was dead.

'When did they tell you?'

'Yesterday,' she replies in a low voice, with a furtive glance at the old man.

'Who told you?'

She doesn't answer his question, but says, with forced enthusiasm, 'Just imagine, they've given me permission to bring you a few little things. Especially underwear. You're going to be able to change at last, my poor Frank.'

She is shocked by him, shocked by the way he looks, his crumpled clothes, his turned-up coat collar, his dirty shirt with no tie, his unkempt

hair, his nineteen-day growth of beard and his loose shoes. She feels sorry for him, that's obvious. He doesn't need anybody's pity, especially not Lotte's. She disgusts him, with her make-up and her white hat.

Would the old man want her? Has she tried? He is sure she has put on good underwear just in case.

'I put everything in a suitcase. These gentlemen will give it to you.'

She looks around for the suitcase, which is against the wall. He recognizes it.

'Above all, you mustn't let yourself go.'

What does she mean?

'Everyone's been very kind. Everything's going very well.'

'What's going well?'

He is harsh, almost vicious. He hates being like that, but he can't do otherwise.

'I decided to close the business.'

She is holding her handkerchief rolled into a ball in the hollow of her hand and looks as if she is on the verge of tears.

'It was Hamling who advised me to do it. You were wrong not to trust him. He's done all he could.'

'Is Minna still with you?'

'She doesn't want to leave me alone. She sends you her regards. If I could find another apartment, we'd move, but it's almost impossible to find one.'

This time, the look Frank gives her is pitiless, almost angry. 'Will you leave the building?'

'You know how people are. Now that you're not there any more, it's worse than ever.'

'Is Sissy dead?' he asks curtly.

'No, of course not! What makes you think that?'

She looks at the little gold watch on her bracelet. For her, time still counts. She knows how many minutes she is still entitled to.

'Does she go out?'

'She doesn't go out. She's . . . You know, Frank, I don't know what exactly she's got. I think she's just down. She's finding it hard to bounce back.'

'What's the matter with her?'

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen her personally. Nobody sees her, except her father and Mr Wimmer. They say she’s suffering from depression.’

‘Has Holst gone back to working on the trams?’

‘No. He works at home.’

‘Doing what?’

‘I don’t know that either. Some kind of bookkeeping. The little I’ve been able to find out was through Hamling.’

‘Does he see them?’

Before, the chief inspector only knew the Holsts by name.

‘He’s been to their place several times.’

‘Why?’

‘Frank, what do you want me to say? You ask questions as if you didn’t know the building. I don’t see anybody. Anny’s left. Apparently, she’s being kept by a . . .’ Talking about the occupiers is probably not allowed here. ‘If Minna had left me, too, I don’t know what would have become of me.’

‘Have you seen any of my friends?’

‘No, nobody.’

She is disconcerted, disappointed. She must have come all cheerful, the way you go to see a patient in hospital, taking them grapes or oranges, and he isn’t even taking her good intentions into account, it is as if he resents her, as if he holds her responsible for his own disappointment.

He points to a package on the chair, next to his mother.

‘What’s that?’ he asks.

‘Nothing. Some things that were in the suitcase that I’m not allowed to leave you.’

‘I don’t want you to move house.’

She sighs, losing patience. Doesn’t he understand she can’t talk as freely as she would like? Yes, of course he knows. But he doesn’t care. So the tenants are making life impossible for Lotte? What of it? He forbids her to move house, full stop. Is it up to her or to him to decide? Who matters right now?

‘Has Holst talked to you?’

For some reason, she seems embarrassed as she replies:

‘Not directly.’

‘Has he had Hamling say something to you?’

‘No, Frank. Why are you bothered about that? There’s nothing to worry about from that direction. It’s all over. If I want to get another opportunity

to come and see you, you mustn't go on like this the first time around. I'd like to kiss you, but it's better not. They might think you're whispering a message in my ear.'

He doesn't have any desire to kiss her anyway. She must already have been here for a while before he came down, if they had time to search the suitcase before his arrival.

'Be good. Look after yourself. Above all, don't worry about a thing.'

'I'm not worried.'

'How strange you are.'

She, too, can't wait for it to be over. She will go and wait for her tram opposite the gate and she will snivel all the way home.

'Goodbye, Frank.'

'Goodbye, Mother.'

'Take care of yourself.'

Of course he will! As if he had the intention of letting himself waste away!

The old man raises his eyes, looks at them in turn, then points out the suitcase to Frank. A plainclothes man leads Lotte back across the courtyard, and her steps can be heard as she walks away, her high heels on the hardened snow. The old man speaks slowly, searching for his words. He is determined to use the right expression, and his pronunciation is as correct as he can make it. He has taken lessons and continues to practise.

'You must go and get ready.'

He utters the syllables carefully. He doesn't seem unpleasant, merely anxious to act properly. He is hesitant about launching into a longer sentence and repeats it mentally before taking the risk.

'If you'd like to have a shave, we can take you to see the barber.'

Frank refuses. A mistake. It would have allowed him to discover another part of the buildings. He can't say what impulse he obeyed. He isn't particularly determined to be dirty, to play the hairy prisoner. The truth – it will take him some days to realize it – is that when his beard was referred to, he automatically thought of Holst's felt boots.

There is no connection. He really would like there to be no connection. He prefers to change the course of his thoughts.

And now there is no lack of material. They let him carry his suitcase. Once again, a plainclothes man walks in front of him and the soldier behind

him as he is taken back to his classroom; he almost has the illusion he is going to a hotel room. They close the door behind him, and he is alone.

Why have they ordered him to get ready? Because it is an order, there can be no doubt about that. The moment has come. They are going to take him somewhere. Will they make him take his suitcase with him? Will he come back here afterwards? They must have removed the newspaper the objects were wrapped in, and everything is a jumble. There are bars of pink toilet soap that remind him of Bertha's skin, a smoked sausage, quite a large piece of bacon, a pound of sugar and some bars of chocolate. He also finds half a dozen of his shirts and pairs of socks, as well as a brand new pullover, which his mother must have bought him. Right at the bottom, there is even a thick pair of knitted woollen gloves, the kind he would never have worn outside.

He changes. He has missed the woman at the window. He is thinking too quickly. It doesn't count. He is being made to hurry, which does nothing to improve his mood. He almost regrets his solitude and his little habits. When he comes back, if he comes back, he will have to make sense of all that's in his head. He bites into the chocolate, without realizing that he hasn't done that for nineteen days, and what lingers from Lotte's visit is a feeling of disappointment.

He doesn't know how it could have happened, but he is disappointed. He could find no point of contact with her. He asked her questions, and it seemed to him, it still seems to him, that what she replied had no connection with what he asked her.

And yet she did give him news, as quickly and directly as she could. The authorities must have left her alone, if she didn't yet know where he was the day before. That means his name hasn't been in the newspapers. The local police aren't involved in the case. She must have found out from Kurt Hamling.

Hamling is still paying visits, but he has crossed the landing, rather as you might cross a river. Now he is seeing the Holsts. For what purpose? Holst isn't working on the trams any more. There is a perfectly simple reason for that. On alternate weeks, his job obliged him to come home in the middle of the night, and during his absence Sissy was alone. He must have found another job, one that only occupies him during the day.

Sissy isn't being left alone any more. He knows enough about how his mother and people of her sort talk about such things. The fact that she

mentioned the word depression and seemed a little embarrassed must mean it is more serious than that.

Has Sissy gone mad?

He isn't afraid of words. He forces himself to say this one out loud:

'Mad!'

There! With the two men, her father and old Wimmer, taking turns to be with her, and the chief inspector coming from time to time and sitting there without taking off his coat or his galoshes, which leave traces of wetness on the floor.

They are going to take Frank somewhere. Otherwise there would have been no point in telling him to get ready. And now he is ready much too early. He has nothing else to do and there is no point in thinking during this interlude. It wouldn't lead anywhere, only diminish his faculties a little. After the chocolate, he chews on the sausage. It never occurred to his mother that he has no knife to cut it. And he has no water left to wash his face. Now he smells of smoked meat.

Why don't they come quickly? Why don't they take him? And above all why don't they bring him back as quickly as possible and leave him in peace?

The same plainclothes man as earlier. Basically, apart from the soldiers, who change all the time, there aren't very many of them. They all look alike. If Timo is right, the sector they belong to must be quite a highly placed one. Didn't Timo tell him that the man the colonel started shaking in front of looked like a minor civil servant?

Here, they are all like that. You never see any of them looking cheerful, or smartly turned out. You can't imagine them sitting down to a good meal or with their arms around girls. In appearance, these men are made for stringing figures together.

Since, again according to Timo, the truth is the opposite of appearances as far as they're concerned, they must be terribly powerful.

The small office again. The old man isn't there. Maybe he has gone to lunch. Frank sees his tie and shoelaces on the desk. They point at the objects and tell him, in a terrible accent:

'You can!'

He sits down on a chair. He isn't at all scared of them. If these people understood his language better, he would start talking to them about something, anything.

There are two of them waiting, with hats on their heads. As they go out, one of them hands him a cigarette, then a match.

‘Thanks.’

A car is parked in the courtyard, not a Black Maria, not a military vehicle, but a shiny black car, the kind that rich people who could afford a chauffeur used to have in the old days. Very smoothly and noiselessly, it drives out through the gate and heads for town, following the tram lines. Even though the windows are shut, the air even has something of the taste of the air outside. There are people on the pavements, shop windows, a little boy pushing half a brick with his foot and hopping.

They didn’t get him to bring his suitcase. Nor did they make him sign any papers. He’ll be back. He’s convinced he’ll be back and again see the woman hanging baby things at her window. Damn, if only he had turned in time, he might have been able to identify the building. He will have to remember when he gets back.

The journey is a lot shorter by car than by tram. They are already nearing the centre of town. They drive around the outside of an imposing building where most of the military offices are. This is where the general must have his office. There are sentries at all the doors, and barriers to stop civilians from passing along the pavement.

They don’t pull up by the monumental front steps, but outside a low door in a sidestreet, where there used to be a police station that has since been moved. He doesn’t need them to motion to him to get out. He has understood. For a moment, a short moment, he stands motionless in the middle of the pavement. He sees people on the other side of the street. He doesn’t recognize anyone. Nobody recognizes him, nobody looks at him. He doesn’t linger. That’s certainly not allowed.

He enters of his own accord. He waits for a second and is then led through a maze of dark, complicated corridors, where there are mysterious inscriptions on the doors and where, from time to time, they pass a secretary carrying files under her arm.

He won’t be tortured in a place like this. There wouldn’t be so many female employees in light-coloured blouses. They don’t even look at him as he passes. There is nothing dramatic here. These are offices, pure and simple, lots and lots of offices piled high with paperwork, where uniformed officers and sergeants work and smoke cigars. The mysterious signs on the doors, letters followed by numbers, clearly indicate different departments.

It is another sector, Timo's right. You immediately feel the difference. Is it a higher or lower sector? He is not yet capable of saying. Here, for example, you hear raised voices, whispers, laughter. There are well-fed men puffing out their chests and tightening their belts before leaving; you sense the women's breasts beneath their blouses, the softness of their hips under their skirts. There must be some who make love on the corners of the desks.

Frank himself behaves differently. He looks around him as he would anywhere and he feels a little embarrassed that he has kept his beard. He holds himself almost the way he did before. He tries to see himself in the glass of a door and raises a hand to his tie.

They arrive. It is almost at the top of the building. The rooms have lower ceilings and smaller windows, and the corridors are dusty. He is shown into a first office, where there is nobody, and where the only things to be seen are green filing cabinets the whole length of the walls and a large white wooden table covered in dirty blotting pads.

Is he wrong? He gets the impression his two companions don't feel at home, that they have assumed expressions that are both distant and humble, with perhaps a small touch of irony, or scorn. They look at each other questioningly, then one of them knocks at a side-door. The man disappears and returns immediately, followed by a fat officer in an unbuttoned tunic.

From the doorway, the officer looks Frank up and down, puffing at his cigar with a self-important air.

He seems pleased, although at first glance he looked a little surprised to find that Frank is so young.

'Come here!'

He is simultaneously gruff and good-natured. To bring him in, he puts a hand on his shoulder. The two plain-clothes men don't follow him into the office. The officer shuts the door. In a corner, near another door, a younger, lower-ranking officer is working by the light of a lamp, that part of the room being dimly lit.

'Friedmaier, isn't it?'

'That's my name.'

The officer glances at the typewritten sheet of paper which has been made ready. 'Frank Friedmaier. Very good. Sit down.'

He gestures to a straw-bottomed chair on the other side of his desk and pushes a cigarette box and a lighter towards him. It must be a habit. The

cigarettes are there for visitors, because the officer himself is smoking a cigar that's unusually light and perfumed.

He has sat back in his armchair, belly thrust forwards. He has sparse hair and the complexion of a big eater.

'So, my friend, what do you have to tell me?'

He may have an accent, but he speaks the language fluently, understands the nuances, and his familiarity is deliberate.

'I don't know,' Frank says.

'Ha, ha! *I don't know!*'

This reply seems to delight him, and he translates it for the other officer.

'We'll have to find out, though, won't we? We've given you enough time to think.'

'To think about what?'

This time, the officer frowns, stands up, walks over to a cabinet, takes out a file and looks through it. All this may be play-acting. He sits down again, resumes his pose and flicks the ash from his cigar with the nail of his little finger. 'I'm waiting.'

'All I ask is to answer your questions.'

'There you are! What questions? I bet you don't know?'

'No.'

'You don't know what you've done?'

'I don't know what I'm being accused of.'

'There you are! There you are!'

It is like a curious kind of tic. He is constantly saying these words.

'You'd like to know what it is we want to know. There you are! That's right, isn't it?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Because maybe you know other things as well?'

'I don't know anything.'

'You don't know anything! Anything at all! But it was in your pockets that we found this, wasn't it?'

For a moment, Frank has been expecting to see the revolver emerge from the drawer into which the officer has plunged his hand. He has turned pale. He knows they are looking at him. He looks almost regretfully at his interrogator's hand and is quite surprised to recognize the wad of banknotes he carried around in his pockets and displayed every other minute.

'There you are! But I don't suppose this is anything, is it?'

‘It’s money.’

‘It’s money, yes. Lots of money.’

‘I earned it.’

‘There you are, you earned it! When we earn money, there’s always someone, or a bank, that gives it to us. That’s right, isn’t it? Well, the one thing I want to know is who gave you that money. It’s quite simple. Easy, in fact. All you have to do is tell me the name. There you are!’

There is a sudden silence, then, after a good moment, the officer repeats, more ingratiatingly, his cheeks slightly pink:

‘All you have to do is tell me the name.’

‘I don’t know it.’

‘You don’t know who gave you all that money?’

‘I’m sure I got it from several places.’

‘Of course!’

‘I do business.’

‘Of course!’

‘You get money here and there. You exchange notes. You don’t always make a note of—’

But, all of a sudden, the man changes tone.

‘No!’ he says categorically, slamming the drawer shut.

He looks furious, threatening. He walks around the desk, approaches Frank and touches his shoulder again. For a second, Frank thinks he is going to slap him. But instead he forces him to stand, while continuing to talk as if to himself.

‘This is just any old money, is it? Money you get here and there, money you stuff in your pocket without even bothering to look at it!’

‘Yes.’

‘No!’

Frank’s throat feels tight. He doesn’t know where his interrogator is going with this. He feels a vague threat, a mystery. He has been thinking frantically for eighteen days, almost nineteen. He has tried to foresee everything, and nothing is happening the way it ought to happen. All at once, he has been transported to another level. The school and the old man with the glasses suddenly represent an almost reassuring world, and yet he has a cigarette between his lips, he can hear a typewriter clicking in the next room, and women are passing in the corridor.

‘Take a good look at this, Friedmaier, and tell me if this is just any old money.’

He has taken one of the banknotes from the desk. He draws Frank over to the window, one hand still on his shoulder, and holds up the banknote in such a way that you can see through it.

‘Come closer! Don’t be afraid! There’s no need to be afraid.’

Why do these words seem more threatening than the sound of blows he heard the first day in the old man’s office?

‘Have a good look. In the left-hand corner. See the little holes? Six tiny little holes. There you are! And the little holes form a pattern. And there are little holes like these on all the banknotes that were in your pocket and on those you spent.’

He is unable to speak, unable to think. It is as if a hole has opened up in front of him in the place where he least expected it, as if the wall around the window has disappeared, leaving the two men suspended above the street.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh, so you don’t know?’

‘No.’

‘And I don’t suppose you know what these little holes mean either? There you are! You don’t know!’

‘No.’

It’s true. He has never heard of this before. He has the impression that simply knowing the meaning of what the officer calls the little holes must be a more damning charge against him than any crime. He wishes the man would look him in the eyes and see how totally sincere he is.

‘I swear I don’t know.’

‘But I do.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that I know. And that’s why I need to find out where you got those notes.’

‘I told you—’

‘No!’

‘I assure you—’

‘The notes were stolen.’

‘Not by me.’

‘You’re right!’ How can he be so sure? And now he says, hammering out the syllables, ‘They were stolen from *here*.’ And as Frank looks around him

with terror in his eyes, he adds, 'They were stolen from here, *from this building.*'

Frank is afraid he is going to faint. From now on, he will understand the words 'cold sweat'. He understands other things. He thinks he understands it all.

The little holes are made in the banknotes by the occupiers. But in which notes? From which reserve?

Nobody knows, nobody has ever suspected, and it is already terrifying to be in on the secret.

He isn't the one being accused, damn it! It isn't Kromer either. They know perfectly well the two of them are just petty black marketeers and that people like them don't have access to certain safes.

Do they already suspect the general? Have they arrested Kromer? Have they questioned him? Has he talked?

Frank has been going round and round in circles for eighteen and a half days. But all of that was false, stupid. He has been concerned with people who didn't matter, people on his level, as if fate would have used such intermediaries.

Fate has chosen a banknote, probably one of the ones he spent, maybe at Timo's, or at the tailor's that sold him his camelhair overcoat? Or maybe it was one of the notes he gave Kropetzki for his sister's eyes?

'We'll have to find out, won't we?' the officer says, sitting back down and again pushing the cigarette box towards Frank. 'There you are, Friedmaier! That's the long and the short of it!'



PART THREE

THE WOMAN AT THE WINDOW

1.

He is lying on his stomach, asleep. He is aware that he is asleep. It is something he has learned only recently, along with lots of other things. In the old days, it was only towards morning, especially when the sun had just risen, that he was aware of being asleep. And as it was even stronger when he had been drinking the night before, he sometimes drank to excess and got back late just so that he could savour that kind of sleep.

Not that it was exactly the same as his new sleep. In the old days, he never slept on his stomach. Do all the prisoners here learn to sleep on their stomachs? He has no idea, and he doesn't care. And yet he would happily employ their complicated system of correspondence if he had the patience or the inclination to study it, in order to tell them, 'Sleep on your stomachs!'

It wasn't just about sleeping on your stomach. It was about burrowing, like an animal, like an insect, into the planks that make up the base of his bed. Hard as they are, he has the impression he will leave the imprint of his body on them, like when you sleep on the ground in a field.

He is flat on his stomach, and it hurts. Lots of little bones or muscles hurt, not immediately, and not all together, but in an order he is starting to be familiar with and which he has become capable of orchestrating, like a symphony. There are deep, dark pains and sharp pains, so sharp they make you see bright yellow. Some only last a few seconds, but their intensity makes them voluptuous, and you miss them when they wear off, while others form a background, melt together, harmonize so well that in the end it is impossible to identify the sore spot.

His face is buried in his jacket, which is rolled into a ball and now serves as his pillow, a jacket that was actually almost new when Frank arrived. And he was stupid enough, in the early days, to treat it carefully by taking it off for the night, which stopped him from feeling as good as he might have.

To feel good. To smell that earth smell, the smell of something living and sweating. He deliberately sticks his nose in the place that smells strongest, under his arms. He would like to stink, as people say outside, to stink the way the earth stinks, because people outside think that men stink, that the earth stinks.

To feel his own heartbeat, to feel it everywhere: in his temples, in his wrists, in his toes. To smell the odour of his breath, to feel the warmth of his breath. And to mingle the images, bigger than life, truer than life, things seen, things heard and lived, others, too, that might have happened, to mingle all that, with his eyes closed and his body inert, while still listening out for particular footsteps on the iron staircase.

He has become very good at this game. But is it a game? No, it's life. At school, they used to say, 'He's good at maths.' Not about him, but about a classmate with a large head.

Well, now Frank is good at life. He knows how to burrow into his planks, bury his face in his jacket, close his eyes, dive in, dump ballast, go up and down at will, or almost. Somewhere, there are days, hours, minutes. Not here, not for him. Sometimes, when he really wants to count, he counts in 'dives'.

It seems stupid. He hasn't become stupid. He hasn't lost his footing, and he is more determined than ever not to let himself go. On the contrary, he has made progress. What is the point, for example, of being concerned about the hours, such as they are used outside, in a place where nothing is adjusted to them?

If you cut a cake in quarters and you're greedy, you worry about the quarters. But what if you cut it into slices? Or into thimble-sized pieces?

Everything has to be learned, starting with sleep. To think that men imagine they know how to sleep! Because they have as many hours to devote to sleep as they choose. There are those who dare to complain that they are slaves of their alarm-clock, when it is they themselves who set it when they go to bed, and they sometimes come out of their half sleep to make sure it is properly set!

To be woken by an alarm-clock you have set! To be woken by yourself, in other words! And to hear them, that's slavery!

Let them learn first of all to sleep on their stomachs, to sleep wherever, on the ground, like worms, like insects. And, for lack of the smell of the earth, let them learn to be content with their own smell.

Lotte sprays perfume under her arms, probably between her thighs, too, and forces her girls to do the same.

It's inconceivable!

To sleep on your stomach, to measure out your aches, watch for them, orchestrate them, to stick your tongue in the hole left by your two missing teeth and tell yourself that, if everything goes well, if it's one of your lucky days, you'll see the window open over there beyond the courtyard, to sleep like that, to think like that – that's already close to the truth. It isn't yet the whole truth, he knows that. It's comforting all the same to know you are on the right track.

The signal is the men from the classroom next door leaving for their exercise. How else to put it? They have a spring in their step. Whatever happens, even those who will be shot tomorrow have a spring in their step, maybe because they don't yet know!

They pass. Right! Now, the question is: does the old man have enough work or not? The old man is a lot more important than anyone else in the world. He can't be married. If he is, his wife must have stayed in her country, which comes to the same thing. However busy he is, he is the kind of man who could raise his head and order, 'Bring me Frank Friedmaier.'

Fortunately, he seldom does so at this hour. What's most fortunate is that he doesn't know, that nobody knows, and that's one of the reasons Frank has got into the habit of sleeping on his stomach. If they knew he was listening out, if they suspected for a moment the joy it gives him, they would probably change the timetable.

It isn't winter any more. No, that's wrong! It's the middle of winter, obviously. The worst of the cold hasn't passed, but is still to come. It generally comes in February or March, and the later it comes, the harsher it is. It sometimes lasts until the middle, or even the end, of April.

Let us say they are through the darkest part of the tunnel. This year, as sometimes happens at the end of January, there is a false spring; at least that's what they call it outside. The air and sky are limpid. The snow glitters without melting and yet it isn't cold. The water is icy every morning, and there is such beautiful sunshine all day long that you would swear the birds are going to build their nests. In fact, the birds must be taken in by it, because they can be seen flying in couples, pursuing each other as if mating.

The window, over there beyond the gymnasium or the assembly hall, stays open for longer. Once, he guessed from the woman's movements that she was busy ironing. And another time – it was wonderful, un hoped for – she was probably taking advantage of one of the mildest days to do some spring cleaning. The window remained open *for more than two hours!* Had she put the cradle in another room or wrapped the sleeping baby warmly? She was beating clothes, including men's clothes. She shook them, beat them like rugs, and each of her movements caused Frank terrible pain as well as doing him good.

From a distance, she is no larger than a doll. He wouldn't recognize her in the street. Not that it matters, because the opportunity will never present itself. She isn't a doll. Her features are impossible to make out, but she is a woman, a woman busy with her own household. The enthusiasm with which she takes care of it! He feels it, he senses it.

It is because of her that he is so alert in the morning. Logically, at this hour, he ought to be sleeping heavily. At first, he was afraid he would miss her. In fact, he only missed her once, once when he was really exhausted. And even then it was at a time when he hadn't yet learned to orchestrate his sleep.

She doesn't know. She will never know. She is a woman, not rich, probably poor to judge by the place where she lives. She has a man and a child. The man must leave for his work early, because Frank has never seen him. Does she make his lunch ready for him in a tin box, like the one Holst took with him on his tram? It's possible. It's likely. Immediately afterwards, she gets down to work, in her home, in their home. She probably sings every now and again, or laughs with the baby. Because babies don't just cry, as his nurse tried to make him believe.

'Whenever you cried . . .'

'The day you cried so loudly . . .'

'That Sunday when you were so unbearable . . .'

She didn't once say, 'Whenever you laughed . . .'

And the bed, the bed that smells of *the two of them*. She doesn't know. If she did, she wouldn't put the sheets and blankets out to dry at the window. She wouldn't even open the window. Lucky for him that she is on the outside. In her place, he would shut everything, keep everything in, let nothing of their life escape.

The morning of the spring clean seemed to him so exceptional that he found it hard to believe that fate could still have such joys in store for him. Over there, she was celebrating the false spring in her way, by airing, cleaning, scouring. She shook everything, moved everything. She was beautiful!

He has never seen her at close quarters, but it doesn't matter: she was beautiful!

And there is a man, somewhere in town, who leaves in the morning with the certainty that he will see that woman again in the evening, and the child in its cradle, and the bed with their smells!

It doesn't really matter what he does, what he thinks. It doesn't matter that, from a distance, the woman at the window is reduced to the proportions of a puppet show. It is Frank who lives their life most intensely. Even if, lying on his stomach, he only risks keeping one eye open, because if they noticed what he is fascinated by, they would change the timetable.

He knows them. Isn't it Timo who claimed to know them? Timo had only scraps of truth, more like stock truths, the kind you read in the newspapers.

When he was little, his nurse, Mrs Porse, would infuriate him by saying, 'You fought with Hans again *because* . . .' And her *because* was always wrong . . . *Because* Hans was the son of a big farmer. *Because* he was rich . . . *Because* he was the strongest . . . *Because* . . . *Because* . . .

All his life, he has seen people get things wrong when they say *because*. Lotte foremost among them! Lotte has understood even less than the rest of them.

There is no *because*. It is a word for idiots. For people outside, anyway. With their *because*, there would be nothing surprising about them eventually giving him a medal he hasn't deserved, or decorating him posthumously.

Because what?

Why didn't he answer the officer who blew his cigar smoke in his face, when he was interrogated over there on the top floor of headquarters? He was no more of a hero than anyone else.

'You must know, Friedmaier.'

That business of banknotes with little holes in them had nothing to do with him. He just needed to reply, 'Ask the general.' It was so stupid! A simple matter of watches. Since Frank didn't know the general personally,

he would have been forced to add, 'I gave the watches to Kromer, and Kromer gave me my share of the money.'

He doesn't feel sorry for Kromer, and he certainly has no desire to risk his life for him. On the contrary. For some time now, Kromer has been one of the few men he would like to see dead, if not the only one.

So what exactly happened up there in the office?

There was the officer in front of him, still good-natured, with his light cigar and his pink complexion. Frank has never seen the general. He has no reason to sacrifice himself for him. Wouldn't it have been simpler to say, 'That's exactly how it happened, and you're going to admit that I have nothing to do with the banknotes.'

Why didn't he do that? Nobody will ever know. Not even him. He has found explanations two, three, ten days later, all of them different, all of them valid.

The true one, the only one, may be that he had no desire to be released, to be returned to everyday life.

Now he knows. In reality, it didn't matter if he talked or not, at least not as far as the final result was concerned. He wouldn't be able to find a satisfactory answer to someone who explained his attitude by asserting, 'You knew perfectly well you were done for anyway!'

It's obvious. Not that he knew, but that he is *done for*. Only, that was a truth he has only admitted later.

Basically, he resisted for the sake of resisting. It was almost a physical thing. Maybe, at a deeper level, it was his way of responding to the officer's insulting familiarity.

'I'm sorry,' Frank replied.

'You're sorry for what you did, is that it?'

'No, I'm just sorry.'

'Sorry for what?'

'I'm sorry, for your sake, that I have nothing to say.'

And he knew. He was aware of everything, the likelihood of torture, his death, everything. It was as if he was doing it deliberately.

He can't remember now. It's still a bit vague. There he was, as erect as a young cockerel, standing in front of that extraordinary power, and he behaved like a little boy who wants to be slapped.

'You're sorry, is that it, Friedmaier?'

'Yes.'

He was looking the officer straight in the eyes. Was he somehow hoping that the other man, who was working behind him by the light of a lamp, would come to his aid? Was he counting on the typists passing in the corridors? Was he still telling himself, 'That kind of thing can't possibly happen here'?

Whatever the reason, he held out. He didn't even want to blink.

'I'm sorry!' he repeated.

He swore to himself not to utter, even under torture, the word 'general', or the name of that bastard Kromer. Or any name. Or anything at all.

'I'm sorry!'

'Really, you're sorry! Tell me exactly what you're sorry for, Friedmaier. Think before you answer.'

He gave a stupid answer, although he made up for it later:

'I don't know.'

'You're sorry you didn't know before that we make little holes in the notes, is that it?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you sorry you showed that money to everyone?'

'I don't know.'

'And now you're sorry you know too much. There you are! You're sorry you know too much, Friedmaier!'

'I—'

'In a while, you'll regret you didn't talk!'

It all happened in a kind of fog. Neither was concerned with the meaning of the words any more. They threw them out haphazardly, like stones you pick up from the ground without looking.

'You remember now, I bet. You're going to remember.'

'No.'

'Oh, yes. I'm sure you remember.'

'No.'

'Oh, yes. A big pile of banknotes like that!' Sometimes he seemed to be joking, and sometimes his face assumed a fierce expression. 'You remember, Friedmaier.'

'No.'

'At your age, you always remember in the end.'

The cigar! What most stays in his mind is the cigar moving close to his face, then away, the other man's face getting red and covered with blotches,

then, all of a sudden, a certain stillness in those earthenware-blue eyes. He had never seen eyes like that before, especially not at such close quarters.

‘Friedmaier, you’re a lowlife.’

‘I know.’

‘Friedmaier, you’re going to talk.’

‘No.’

‘Friedmaier . . .’

It’s funny how adults continue to do all their lives what they did at school! The officer behaved just like a senior boy in class, or even like a teacher grappling with a young tearaway. He was at the end of his tether. He breathed, almost imploringly, ‘Friedmaier . . .’

Frank had decided, once and for all, to say no.

‘Friedmaier . . .’

There was a ruler on the desk, a solid brass ruler.

The officer grabbed it and repeated, on the verge of losing control:

‘Young Friedmaier, it’s time you understood . . .’

‘No.’

Did Frank want to get the ruler full across his face? It’s possible. It was what happened. Suddenly. Just as he was least expecting it, when perhaps the other man was also least expecting it, even though he already had the ruler in his hand.

‘Friedmaier . . .’

‘No.’

He isn’t a martyr, or a hero. He’s nothing at all. He understood, maybe four, maybe five days later. What would have happened if he had said yes instead of no?

It wouldn’t have changed anything for the others, probably. Kromer is on the run, he is almost certain of that. As for the general, firstly Frank doesn’t give a damn about him, and secondly, the testimony of a runt like him won’t decide the fate of a general anyway. He will disappear from circulation, unless he has already disappeared. Who cares?

What matters, what Frank only discovered later, is that his fate, too, would have been the same whether or not he had spoken, apart from the ruler in his face.

He knows too much now. You don’t put kids who know as much as he does back on the street. If the general’s suicide is announced tomorrow, you don’t want someone going around crying, ‘It isn’t true!’

When it comes to officers, nobody has the right to assert, ‘They’re thieves!’

At the time, up there in that office, he didn’t think about it. He said, ‘No.’ And he isn’t sure now that it was because he wanted to suffer. There was certainly the attraction of torture, the matter of knowing if he would withstand it or not, as he has so often wondered.

Lotte often says of him, ‘He goes crazy if he so much as scratches himself shaving.’

Lotte doesn’t matter. It isn’t about her. Or about anything that concerns her. Only he was at stake when he said no. Just him. Not even Holst. Let alone Sissy.

Nor should anybody think it’s about his friendship for Kromer, or his debt towards the general. It was for himself, Frank, not even Frank, just himself, that he said no.

Just to see!

And the fat officer, as he lost his head, repeated two or three times, ‘Do you understand? Do you understand?’

Frank must have been wearing his most stubborn expression, the one that always infuriates Lotte. In this way, he was taking revenge for all kinds of things – they are scores he will settle later; in any case, in a knowing, almost calculating way he pushed the officer over the edge.

‘You have to—’

‘No.’

‘You will have to, won’t you?’

‘No.’

And there it came! The ruler full in his face, straight across his face. Frank felt it coming. Up until the last moment, he could have said yes, or, at a pinch, have ducked. He didn’t flinch, and there was a cracking of bone.

He wanted that blow. He was scared, but he wanted it. He felt the shock of it all through his body, from head to foot. He closed his eyes. He thought, he hoped, he would end up on the floor, but he remained standing.

What he did that was most difficult – and really that was the only difficult thing – was not to lift his hand to his face. And yet he had the impression that his left eye had come out of its socket. Like the cat in Mrs Porse’s tree! The cat made him think of Sissy. When you have inflicted on someone what he inflicted on her, do you have to right to flinch because of an eye?

Blood was flowing everywhere, down his neck, over his chin, and he didn't say anything, he didn't lift his hand to touch his face, he continued to face the officer, head held high.

Was it at that moment he realized that, whatever happened now, he was done for, but that it didn't matter? If it was, it was only a brief impression. The real discovery is one he has come to patiently, lying here in his corner, on his stomach.

It makes no difference.

He hadn't thought they conducted that kind of operation in the offices. He wasn't far wrong. After delivering the blow, the officer seemed embarrassed and said a few words to his lower-ranking colleague who was working under the lamp. Probably something like, 'You deal with him.'

He had committed an error, hitting him with the brass ruler. Frank knows that now. It shouldn't have happened in that building. Maybe the officer has since been punished for it, or transferred?

The sectors, as Timo says.

The officer by the lamp, who was tall and thin and still young, sighed as if it wasn't the first time the other man had let himself be driven to an act of that kind, then opened a door from which hung an enamel fountain and a towel.

Bones had cracked, or cartilage, Frank was sure of it. He didn't know which. When he opened his mouth, he spat out two teeth and discharged a stream of blood.

'Keep calm. It's nothing.' This second officer also seemed embarrassed. 'When it bleeds, it's nothing,' he said, searching for the words.

All the same, he was annoyed by this blood flowing on to the wooden floor, annoyed by the fact that his chief put his cap on with a swagger and left the office. He seemed to be implying, 'He'll never change!'

The eye hadn't come out of its socket, but it had that effect on Frank. He could have passed out. That would have been easy. It was rather what the officer feared. But Frank wanted to stay hard.

'It'll be nothing. A cut. You got him worked up. That wasn't a good idea!'

Was the thin officer superior to the other? Was it a game to make him talk in spite of everything? This officer was tall and horselike, slow and gentle in his movements. What concerned him was that the blood wouldn't stop flowing, that it streamed from Frank's nose, mouth and cheek.

In the end, in desperation, he resigned himself to calling the two plainclothes men who were waiting in the next room. They looked at each other, then one of them went downstairs.

The matter was quickly sorted. The man who had gone downstairs reappeared. Frank's face was wrapped in a kind of big dark bandage. Together, each holding him by one arm, they took him down to the courtyard, where the car, which they had left outside, had come to wait for them.

Were these gentlemen angry with each other? Is there a genuine rivalry between them? The car set off. Frank was fine, with nothing but the sensation that his head was softly emptying. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation. He remembered that he had to try to spot the building of which he only knew one window, but at the last moment he didn't have the strength to open his eyes.

He was still bleeding. It was disgusting. There was blood everywhere. He barely had time to glimpse the old man, who gave his orders in a few words. The old man wasn't pleased either.

Thus it was that Frank discovered the infirmary, just beneath the iron staircase, which he had never noticed before. It is another classroom, but it has been converted, and lacquered furniture has been installed, along with lots of instruments.

Is the man who treated him a doctor? The fact is, he looked at the wound with contempt, like the old man with glasses. Not contempt for the wound, but for the man who caused it. He seemed to be thinking: that one again!

And 'that one' wasn't Frank. It was the officer.

He was treated. They knocked out a third tooth that was loose. Now he is missing three teeth, two right at the front, the other towards the back. From time to time, when he goes outside, it still gives him pleasant shooting pains.

He hasn't been taken back there. Is it because of the way the officer with the cigar reacted? Surely not. He remembers the blows he heard here on the morning of his arrival.

It is all a matter of tactics. For many things, broadly speaking, Timo is right. Timo doesn't know everything, but he has an overall idea that is fairly accurate.

Here, he has been treated. They have taken him down to the infirmary several times. That is the most painful part, because it almost always

happens at the time when the window is open.

Is that why he has recovered so quickly?

He has thought about that. The day after his return from the town, he deliberately didn't mark the day with a line carved in the plaster on the wall. Nor did he do so for the next five or six days. Then he tried to erase his old marks.

They embarrass him now. They bear witness to a time that has passed. He didn't yet know, in those days. He thought that life was outside. He thought about the time he would go back there.

It's curious! It was when he was meticulously carving a line in the plaster every day that he was desperate.

But not any more. Now he has learned how to sleep. He has learned how to lie flat on his stomach on the planks of his bed and sniff his own smell in the sleeves of his jacket.

What he has also learned, the most important thing of all, is that you have to hold out as long as possible and that it depends only on him. He is holding out. He's holding out so well, he's so proud of it, that if he could communicate with the outside world, he would write a manual on how to hold out.

What matters above all is to make your own corner, to sink deep into your corner. Does that mean anything to people who can still walk the streets?

His fear, for ten days at least, was that he would be called downstairs and confronted with Lotte. She mentioned that she was hoping to visit him again. They can't have given her authorization, because they didn't want her to see Frank in the state he is in now. Are they waiting for his face to become more or less normal again?

He's fine with that. Lotte did come, or rather, she came to one of their offices, she has been making an effort, he knows she has, because he has received two parcels from her, with sausage, bacon, chocolate, soap and underwear, just like the first time.

What else did he hope to find in the parcels, to search them as he did?

Every evening, in the room above the gymnasium, a blind is lowered, the light comes on, and there is nothing more than a gilded rectangle.

Is the man there at that point? Is there really a man? There probably is one, because of the child, but he might just as easily be a prisoner, or living abroad.

If he does come home, how, coming from outside, does he manage to absorb, all in one go, the apartment, the room, the peaceful warmth, the woman, the baby in its cradle? And the kitchen smells, and his slippers waiting for him!

In spite of everything, Lotte will have to come. He will do what he has to for that. He will behave himself for a while. He will appear to cut them some slack.

He knows them now. They find out everything they want to know in the end. Not those in the big building in town, where the officers smoke cigars and offer you cigarettes before hitting you with a brass ruler like hysterical women! Frank has concluded that they don't count.

The real ones are the ones like the old man with the glasses.

With him, it is another kind of struggle. At the end of it, whatever happens, whatever the incidents of the game, it will be all up for Frank. The old man will win. He can't do otherwise. The only thing that can be done is to stop him winning too soon. There is a way, with a lot of effort and a lot of self-control, to gain time.

He doesn't beat Frank. Nor does he have Frank beaten. Frank is willing to assert, after two weeks of personal experience, that the reason they did beat someone here on the day he arrived was because that person deserved it.

He doesn't beat Frank and he isn't sparing of his time. He never gets impatient. He appears not to know about the general or the banknotes – he has never mentioned them, even in passing.

Is it really another sector? Are there airtight walls between the sectors? Some kind of rivalry, or worse? Whatever the case, the old man looked at the scar – still looks at it every day – with an expression of dismay.

His contempt is not directed at Frank, but at the officer with the blond cigar. He doesn't say anything about him, pretends not to know that he exists. He never utters a word unconnected with his interrogation, which, however disordered it might appear, and however tortuous, nevertheless follows an extremely direct path.

Here, he isn't offered cigarettes. He isn't called Friedmaier, and they don't tap him on the shoulder, they don't bother to put on a friendly air.

It's another world. At school, Frank never understood anything about mathematics, and even the word always struck him as mysterious.

Well, what they are doing here is mathematics. It is a world without barriers, lit by a cold light, in which it isn't men who move about, but entities, names, numbers, signs, which change place and value every day.

The word 'mathematics' still isn't exact. What do you call the space where the stars move?

He can't find the word. There are moments when he's so tired! Not to mention that these details no longer matter. What does matter is that he should be understood, that he should understand himself.

For quite a while, Kromer seemed to be a star of the first magnitude. What Frank calls 'quite a while' lasted two interrogations. And in no way, either in pace or duration, do these interrogations resemble the methods of that officer.

But now, Kromer is almost forgotten, he wanders up there among the anonymous stars, from which he is plucked casually every now and again, for one or two questions, before being rejected.

They follow a different logic. The officer was only concerned with the banknotes, and probably the general, while the old man, to all appearances, doesn't give a damn about any of that, even if he knows about it.

It comes to the same thing in the end. A man who knows what he knows doesn't get released.

As far as the officer is concerned, he is already dead.

He hit him across the face, and Frank didn't talk.

Dead!

But the old man then appears, sniffs and decides, 'Not as dead as all that!'

Because a dead man, or someone who is three-quarters dead, can still have something wormed out of him. And the old man's job is to worm things out of people.

The banknotes and the general don't really matter, as long as there is *something*.

And there has to be something, or Frank wouldn't be here.

If it wasn't Frank, it would be someone else, but there would always be something.

What matters, in order to stand up to the old man, is to sleep. The old man himself doesn't sleep. He doesn't need sleep. Maybe he dozes off from time to time, but he must be able to set himself like an alarm-clock and be

just as fresh, as cold, as clear-headed every day, at the hours he has fixed for himself.

He is a fish, a man with the blood of a fish. Fish have cold blood. It is unlikely he sniffs the sweat in his armpits or watches out for a figure no bigger than a doll at a distant window.

The old man will win. The game is fixed. He holds all the cards and he can even allow himself to cheat. For Frank, winning hasn't been on the agenda for a long time.

Would he still like to win if it were possible?

It is by no means certain. Most likely not. What matters is to last out, to last for a long time, to see that window again every morning, the woman leaning out, the baby clothes drying in the sun on a line stretched above the void.

What matters every day is to gain another day.

And that's why it would be ridiculous to carve lines in the plaster of the wall that no longer have any meaning.

It is all a matter of not giving in, not on principle, not to save anything, not as a point of honour, but because one day, without yet knowing why, he decided not to give in.

Does the old man only sleep with one eye open, like him?

It must be a fish's eye in his case, quite round, lidless and fixed, while Frank deliberately, voluptuously, digs his belly into the earth as if into a woman.

2.

He doesn't resent them. It's their job to try, by every means possible, to wear down his resistance. They think they can get to him through sleep. They see to it that he never gets to sleep several hours in a row, and they haven't guessed – they mustn't be allowed to guess – that he has learned how to sleep; that it is they, when all is said and done, who taught it to him.

Since the window opposite is closed, he knows they will be calling him soon. It never happens at the same time two days running. That's another of their little tricks. It would be too easy otherwise. For the afternoon sessions, and especially the night sessions, the times vary considerably. For the morning sessions, the variations are less extreme. The prisoners next door come back from their exercise. They must hate him, consider him a traitor. Not only does he not listen to their messages and not reply, he doesn't pass them on. That's another thing he's understood. The messages are transmitted from classroom to classroom, from wall to wall, even if you don't understand them, because there is a chance they will reach someone to whom they mean something.

It isn't his fault. He doesn't have the time. He doesn't have the inclination either. It strikes him as silly. These people are concerned with the outside world, with their lives, with childish things. They are wrong to resent him. He knows he is playing a much more important game than they are, a game he has to win. It would be terrible to go without seeing it through to the end and winning.

He is asleep. He goes to sleep as soon as the window has closed. He plunges as deep as he can into sleep, in order to recover. He hears footsteps in the next classroom and moans from the room on the left, where someone, probably an old man or a very young one, spends his time groaning.

As always, almost always, they are going to come before the soup. Frank still has a little bacon and a piece of sausage left. In fact, he wonders why

they gave him those two parcels, because without them he would be even weaker.

He is almost willing to grant that the old man shows a certain honesty in the methods he employs, a sense of fair play. Maybe, in his case, he just likes to make things a bit more difficult for himself? Maybe, given Frank's age – he must think of him as a boy – he is determined, in order not to feel ashamed of his own victory, to give him an extra chance?

As far as the soup goes, anyway, they do it again today. It doesn't really matter what day it is, since he no longer counts in days, or in weeks. He has other points of reference. He counts according to the main subject of the interrogations, insofar as you can talk about the main subject with a man who likes to mix everything up.

It's the day after Bertha, four days after the big spring clean in the room with the open window. That is enough.

He was expecting it, in fact. He has recognized a kind of rhythm, like the ebb and flow of the tides. One day, he is called very early; another day, quite late; sometimes, just a few moments before the soup is distributed, when the clatter of the containers can already be heard on the stairs.

He shouldn't, at the beginning, have consumed it to the last drop. It isn't good. It's just hot water, with swedes and sometimes two or three beans. All the same, there are sometimes globules on it, like on dishwater, and then you might be lucky enough to find a very small scrap of greyish meat at the bottom.

It shouldn't interest him, since he has sausage and bacon. But he likes to sit down on the edge of his bed, with his dish between his knees, and feel the warmth descend from his throat into his stomach.

The old man, who is never seen in the courtyard, let alone on the walkways, must have guessed that, because he has had him brought down before the soup.

Frank recognized the footsteps through his sleep; two sets of footsteps: the plainclothes man in normal shoes and the soldier in boots. It's for him. Those two are invariably for him. As if he is the only prisoner to be interrogated. He doesn't lose an iota of sleep. He waits for the door to open. Even then, he pretends to snore, in order to gain a few more seconds. They have to touch his shoulder. It has become a game, although they probably don't realize it.

He hardly ever washes any more, again in order to gain time. All the time he has at his disposal is devoted to sleep. And what he means now by sleep is infinitely more important than other people's sleep. Otherwise, it wouldn't be worth the effort of scraping together the smallest crumbs of time the way he does.

He doesn't smile at them. They don't say hello. Everything happens without a word, in a state of grim indifference. He takes off his coat and puts on his jacket. Downstairs, it is very hot. In the early days, he suffered, because he kept his coat on. It is better to risk catching cold on the walkway or on the stairs. His own heat doesn't have time to disperse on such a short journey.

He doesn't have a mirror, but he senses that he has red eyes, like those who don't sleep enough. They are hot, and they sting. His skin is too taut, too sensitive.

He walks behind the plainclothes man and in front of the soldier, and during that time he continues to sleep. He is still asleep when they enter the little building, where he is sometimes left to wait for a long time – an hour? – in the first room, on the bench, even though there is nobody with the old man.

He continues to catch up. It's a matter of habit. There are noises, voices every now and again and, at irregular intervals, the clatter of the tram in the street. He even hears the cries of children, probably coming out of a nearby school.

The children have a teacher. When you are at school, at least one of your teachers always plays the role of the old man for you. For most grown-ups, there is the boss, the head of the office or the workshop, the owner.

Everybody has his old man. He has understood that, and that's why he doesn't resent him. Pages are being turned next door, papers are being leafed through. Then a plainclothes man appears in the doorway and motions to him, just like at the doctor's or the dentist's, and he stands.

Why do two plainclothes men remain in the room? He has thought about that. He has found several plausible solutions, but they don't satisfy him. Sometimes it is the ones who took him to town on the day of the brass ruler, sometimes he recognizes the one who came to arrest him in Green Street, sometimes there are others, but not many: there are seven or eight in total, and they take turns. They don't do anything. They don't sit at a desk. They

never take part in the interrogation, even in a small way; they would probably never dare. They remain standing, looking indifferent.

To stop him from running away, or from strangling the old man? It's possible. That is the answer that comes immediately to mind. Although there are armed soldiers in the courtyard. They could put one to guard each door.

It's also possible that they don't trust each other. He doesn't reject out of hand the apparently absurd idea that these men are there to observe what the old man does and record his words. Who knows? Maybe there is one among them who is more powerful than he is? Maybe the old man doesn't know which one, maybe he is terrified at the thought of the reports about him that are transmitted to a higher authority?

In appearance, they are like acolytes, like the altar boys who accompany the priest during services. They don't sit down, and they don't smoke.

The old man, on the other hand, smokes all the time. It is almost his only human side. He smokes cigarette after cigarette. On his desk, there is an ashtray which is much too small, and it irritates Frank that nobody ever thinks of changing it for a larger one. It is a green ashtray in the shape of a vine leaf. Even in the morning sessions, it is overflowing with cigarette ends and ashes.

There is a stove in the room, and a coal bucket. All they would have to do, at a pinch, is occasionally empty the ashtray into the bucket, even if it was just once or twice a day.

But they don't. Maybe he doesn't want it? The cigarette ends accumulate, and they are dirty cigarette ends. The old man is a dirty smoker who never takes his cigarette out of his mouth. He salivates, lets it go out several times, lights it again, wets the paper, chews the wisps of tobacco.

His fingertips are brown. So are his teeth. And two little stains, above and below his lips, mark the place where the cigarette goes.

The most unexpected thing, on the part of a man like him, is that he rolls them himself. He seems to attach no importance to material things. You wonder when he eats, when he sleeps, when he shaves. Frank doesn't recall ever seeing him clean-shaven. And yet he takes the trouble, even in the middle of an interrogation, to reach into his pocket and pull out a pig's bladder containing his tobacco. From another pocket, in his waistcoat, he extracts the packet of cigarette papers.

He is meticulous about it. The operation takes time, which is maddening, because during that time it is as if all life is suspended. Is it a trick?

Last night, towards the end of the interrogation – in fact, it was almost morning – he mentioned Bertha. As always when he throws a new name into the ring, he did it in the most unexpected fashion. He didn't use her surname. Anybody would think the old man was a regular there, or someone like Chief Inspector Hamling, for whom Lotte's business affairs have no secrets.

'Why did Bertha leave you?'

Frank has learned to play for time. Isn't that the only reason he is here?

'She didn't leave me. She left my mother.'

'It's the same thing.'

'No. I was never involved in my mother's business.'

'But you slept with Bertha.'

They know everything. God knows how many people they questioned to find out everything they know! God knows how many hours that represents, how many comings and goings!

'You did sleep with Bertha, didn't you?'

'Sometimes.'

'Often?'

'I don't know what you call often.'

'Once, twice, three times a week?'

'It's hard to say. It depended.'

'Did you love her?'

'No.'

'But you slept with her?'

'Sometimes.'

'And did you talk to her?'

'No.'

'You slept with her and you didn't talk to her?'

Sometimes, when he is pressed on subjects like this, he feels like replying with an obscenity. Like at school. But you don't use obscenities to your teacher. Or to the old man. The old man doesn't play games.

'Let's just say I used as few words as possible.'

'What kind of words?'

'I don't know.'

'Did you ever talk to her about what you'd done during the day?'

‘No.’

‘Or ask her what she had done?’

‘Even less.’

‘You didn’t talk to her about the men who slept with her?’

‘I wasn’t jealous.’

That’s the tone. But what needs to be taken into account is that the old man chooses his words carefully, sifts through them before uttering them, which takes time. His desk is a monumental American desk, with lots of compartments and drawers. It is full of pieces of paper which don’t look like anything. He takes them out from one place or another at a particular moment, according to need, and glances at them.

Frank is familiar with those pieces of paper. There is no clerk of the court here, nobody to record his answers. The two plainclothes men, who always remain standing near the doors, don’t have pens or pencils. It wouldn’t surprise Frank unduly if they didn’t know how to write.

It is the old man who writes, always on pieces of paper, on parts of old envelopes, the bottoms of letters or circulars which he carefully cuts. He has tiny, exceptionally fine handwriting, which is probably unreadable to anybody but him.

The fact that there is a piece of paper relating to Bertha in one of his compartments must mean that she has been interrogated. Is that how it should be interpreted? Sometimes, Frank sniffs as he enters the office, searching for smells, traces of whoever has been brought here in his absence.

‘Your mother received officers and high-ranking officials.’

‘It’s possible.’

‘You were often in the apartment during those visits.’

‘I guess I must have been.’

‘You’re young, you’re curious.’

‘I’m young but I’m not curious and I’m certainly not a pervert.’

‘You have friends, contacts. It’s very interesting to know what officers say and do.’

‘Not to me.’

‘Your friend Bertha—’

‘She wasn’t my friend.’

‘She’s not your friend any more, because she left you, you and your mother. I wonder why. I also wonder why raised voices were heard in your

apartment that day, to the point where some of the tenants were alarmed.'

Which tenants? Who have they questioned? He thinks about old Mr Wimmer but doesn't suspect him.

'It's curious that Bertha, who, according to your mother, was almost part of the family, should have left you at that time.'

Has he deliberately implied that Lotte has been questioned? Frank isn't worried about that. He's heard it all before.

'Bertha was very valuable to your mama.' He doesn't know that Frank has never called his mother that, that you don't call someone like Lotte 'mama'. 'I don't know who it was who said . . . ' – he pretends to look through his pieces of paper – ' . . . that she was as strong as a horse.'

'As a mare.'

'As a mare, yes. We'll have to talk about her again.'

At first, Frank thought these were idle words, a way of intimidating him. He never imagined that, in the eyes of the old man, his actions were so important as to set in motion a machine as complicated as the one that must be at work right now.

The most extraordinary thing is that, from his point of view, the old man isn't wrong. He knows where he is going. He knows better than Frank, who is only just starting to discover secrets he never even knew existed.

In this place, they don't go in for idle words. They don't bluff. If the old man says, 'We'll have to talk about her again,' it means he will do more than just talk about her. Poor fat Bertha!

All the same, he doesn't feel any real pity for her, or for anybody. He's past that. He doesn't resent her. He doesn't despise her. He feels no hatred. He ends up looking at some people with the old man's fish eyes, as if through the glass of an aquarium.

The proof that the old man doesn't say anything idly came when he touched on Kromer. That was right at the beginning, when Frank hadn't yet understood. He had imagined that, as had been the case when answering the officer with the ruler, all he had to do was deny everything.

'Do you know someone called Fred Kromer?'

'No.'

'You've never met anybody of that name?'

'I don't recall.'

'And yet he frequents the same places as you, the same restaurants, the same bars.'

‘It’s possible.’

‘Are you sure you never drank champagne with him at Timo’s?’

They are making it easy for him.

‘There are people I’ve drunk with at Timo’s, even champagne!’

That was careless of him. He realizes it immediately, but it’s too late. The old man writes illegibly on his pieces of paper. It doesn’t look like something to be taken seriously, not for a man of his age and in his position. And yet not one of those pieces of paper ever gets lost, there isn’t one that doesn’t come back when the time is right.

‘Are you sure you didn’t just know him by his first name: Fred? There are places where some people are only known by their first names. For example, lots of people who met you pretty much every day don’t know that your surname is Friedmaier.’

‘It’s not the same.’

‘Not the same for you as for Kromer?’

Everything counts. Everything is significant. Everything is recorded. He spends two exhausting hours denying his relationship with Kromer, for no reason, just because it’s the course of action he has decided on. The next day and the following days, Kromer isn’t even mentioned. He thinks they’ve forgotten about him. Then, in the middle of a night session, when he is literally swaying, when his eyes are burning and they are deliberately keeping him standing, he is shown an amateur snapshot of himself with Kromer and two women on the banks of a river in the middle of summer. They have taken their jackets off. It looks very much like a country outing. Kromer can’t resist putting his big hand on the breasts of the blonde who’s with him.

‘Do you know him?’

‘I don’t remember his name.’

‘Or the names of the girls?’

‘Do you expect me to remember the names of all the girls I’ve gone boating with?’

‘One of them, this one, the brunette, is called Lili.’

‘I believe you.’

‘Her father works in the town hall.’

‘That’s possible.’

‘And your companion is Kromer.’

‘Oh?’

He couldn't remember the photograph. He had never had a print of it in his hands. What he does remember is that there were five of them that day, three men and two women, which is never convenient. Fortunately, the third man was busy taking photographs! It was he, too, who did the rowing when they were in the boat. Even if Frank had wanted to tell the old man his name, he wouldn't have been able to.

That proves the seriousness with which they're investigating. God knows where they dug up that photograph! Have they searched Kromer's place? If it was there, it's curious that Frank has never seen it. At the friend's place? At the photographer's that developed the film?

That's precisely what's good about the old man, what encourages Frank and gives him hope. The officer would probably have had him shot immediately, to get rid of him, not to complicate his own life. With this man, he has all the time in the world.

What he really thinks – and it is more a matter of faith than conviction – is that it all depends on him, only on him. Like people who sleep little, who have learned how to sleep, he thinks above all in images, in sensations.

He would have to go back to his dream of flying, when he only had to place his hands flat and press on the air with all his might, *with all his will*, to rise, slowly at first, then with ease, until his head touched the ceiling.

He can't talk about that. Even if Holst was here in person, he wouldn't admit to him his secret hope. Not yet. It is exactly like in a dream, and it is wonderful that he has had that dream several times, because it helps him now. It may be a dream, too, that he is living through right now. There are moments when, because of sleeping so much, he is no longer sure. It depends on him, on his will, this time, too.

If he has the energy, if he continues to keep the faith, it will last as long as it has to.

It's not a question of going back outside. For him, it's not a question of the kind of hope the people confined in the next classroom must entertain. That kind of hope doesn't interest him, in fact it shocks him.

They are doing what they can. It's not their fault.

For him, there is a certain amount of time to be gained. If he was asked the length of this amount of time, to specify it in days, weeks, months, he would be incapable of answering. And what if he was asked what there must be at the end of it?

Come on! It's better to argue with the old man! There is a time for everything. It is a standing interrogation. He distinguishes the standing interrogations from the seated interrogations. It is quite a naive trick, when all is said and done. It is always in order to put him in a state of least resistance. He doesn't let on that he prefers to stand. When they make him sit, it is on a stool without a back, which over a long period is even more tiring.

As for the old man, he never stands up, never feels the need to walk about the room in order to stretch his legs. Not once, even during an interrogation of five hours, has he walked out to relieve himself or drink a glass of water. He doesn't drink anything. There is nothing to drink on his desk. He makes do with smoking cigarettes, and even then he always lets them go out two or three times.

He uses a whole lot of tricks. The one, for example, of always leaving Frank's revolver on his desk, as if it had been forgotten, as if it were an anonymous object of no importance. He uses it as a paperweight. Since the first day, since the search, he has never referred to it. The weapon is nevertheless there, like a threat.

It is important to think clearly. Frank isn't the only one in this sector. In spite of the time that the old man is devoting to him, which is considerable, it is to be assumed that a man of his importance has other problems to solve, other prisoners to question. Does his revolver stay there while he interrogates the others? Or is it an element of the decor that changes for each person? Is the revolver sometimes replaced by another object, a knife, a cheque, a letter, some other piece of evidence?

How to explain that this man is a godsend? Others wouldn't understand and would start to hate him. Without him, Frank wouldn't have a constant sense of the time remaining to him. Without him, without these exhausting interrogations, he might never have suspected it was possible to achieve the level of clear-headedness he has now, so different from what he used to think of as clear-headedness.

He has to remain on his guard, though, avoid cutting him too much slack at any one time. There would be a risk of it going too quickly, and they would get directly to the end.

It mustn't finish too soon. Frank still has things to get straight. It's slow. It's both fast and slow at the same time.

That stops him from being concerned with the men they take out of the classroom next door and shoot. The most impressive thing, when it comes down to it, is the time of day chosen for that: it is when the prisoners are barely awake, wild-eyed, unwashed, unshaven, without a cup of coffee in their stomachs, and the cold forces them, without exception, to turn up the collars of their jackets. Why aren't they allowed to put their coats on? It's a mystery. It's not because of the value of the garment. And the material, however thick it is, won't stop the bullets. Maybe it's just to make it more sinister?

Would Frank turn up the collar of his jacket? Possibly. He doesn't think about it. He seldom thinks about it. Actually, he is convinced he won't be shot in the courtyard, near the covered playground with the piled-up desks.

These people are men who have been judged, who have committed a crime, who can be judged and inscribed in the big books of justice. Cheating a little, if need be.

If they had had to judge him, it is more than likely he would have been sent back to the officer with the brass ruler.

When it is all over, when the old man, in all good conscience, judges that he has wormed everything he possibly can out of him, he will be made to disappear unceremoniously, he doesn't yet know where, he doesn't know the place well enough; they will shoot him in the back, on a staircase or in a corridor. There must be a cellar that is used for that.

By then, he won't care. He isn't afraid. His one fear, his obsession, is that it should happen too soon, before the time he will have decided, before it is over.

He will be the first one, if they insist, to say to them, 'Go ahead!'

If he could express a last wish, he would ask them to do what they had to do while he was lying flat on his stomach on his bed.

Doesn't all this prove that the old man is a godsend? He will find something new again. Every day he finds something new. It's a question of being alert on all fronts at once, thinking as much about Timo as about the people he met at Taste's, or the anonymous tenants of the building. That old demon with the glasses deliberately mixes everything up.

What is his latest find? He has taken the time to wipe his glasses with the vast coloured handkerchief that always sticks out of the pocket of his trousers. He has played with his pieces of paper as usual. To anyone observing him through the window who didn't know, it would almost look

like a lottery, or a game of lotto. He really does seem to be plucking things at random. Then he rolls a cigarette, with the irritating slowness of an obsessive. He sticks his tongue out to lick the paper and searches for his box of matches.

He can never find his matches, which are buried beneath the papers. He doesn't look at Frank. He rarely looks him in the face, and when he does it is with perfect indifference. Who knows if the other two, the altar boys, aren't there just to keep an eye on Frank's reactions and report on them afterwards?

'Do you know Anna Loeb?'

Frank doesn't bat an eyelid. He hasn't batted an eyelid for a long time. He thinks about it. It's a name he doesn't know, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Of course, like everyone, he knows the name Loeb. Loeb's Brewery: he has been drinking their beer since he was old enough to drink it. The name is displayed in big letters on the gables of houses, on the walls of cafés and groceries, on calendars, and even on the windows of trams.

'I know the beer.'

'I'm asking if you know Anna Loeb.'

'No.'

'And yet she was one of your mother's girls.'

So it must be someone else of that name.

'You may be right. I don't know.'

'Perhaps this will help you to remember?'

He takes a photograph from a drawer and holds it out to him. He is a man who always has photographs in reserve. Frank has to restrain himself from crying out, 'Anny!'

Yes, it's her, but an Anny quite different from the one he knew, maybe because she is in a smart summer dress, with a broad straw hat on her head, smiling and giving her arm to someone the old man hides with his thumb.

'Do you know her?'

'I'm not sure.'

'She lived in the same apartment as you recently.'

'It's possible.'

'She says she slept with you.'

'That's possible, too.'

'How many times?'

'I don't know.'

Has Anny been arrested? You never know with them. It's in their interests to tell lies in order to get at the truth. It's part of their job. Frank is never completely fooled by these pieces of paper.

'Why did you bring her to your mother's?'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

'I never brought her to my mother's!'

'So who did?'

'I have no idea.'

'Do you mean to say she presented herself of her own accord?'

'There'd be nothing incredible about that.'

'In that case, we can only assume that someone gave her your address.'

He doesn't yet understand, senses a trap, doesn't reply. There are long silences like this, which is why these interrogations can last an eternity.

'Your mother's activities are illegal. We don't need to go over that.'

That could just as easily mean that Lotte has also been arrested.

'So it was in your mother's interests that only a small number of people should know about her. The reason Anna Loeb showed up at her apartment is that she knew she could find refuge there.'

The word 'refuge' rings warning bells for Frank, who has to fight simultaneously against sleep and against vague thoughts that, at the least lapse in concentration, take possession of him and which he rejects only reluctantly, because in reality they are now his whole life.

He repeats the word like a sleepwalker. 'A refuge?'

'Are you claiming you know nothing about Anna Loeb's past?'

'I didn't even know her name.'

'What did she call herself?'

That's what he calls cutting them some slack. He's forced to do it.

'Anny.'

'Who sent her to you?'

'Nobody.'

'Your mother accepted her without any recommendation?'

'She was a pretty girl, and she could make love. That's all my mother asks.'

'How many times did you sleep with her?'

'I don't remember.'

'Were you in love with her?'

‘No.’

‘Was she in love with you?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But you slept together.’

Is he some kind of puritan, or a pervert, to attach so much importance to these questions? Or is he impotent? He did the same when asking about Bertha.

‘What did she say to you?’

‘She never said anything.’

‘How did she spend her time?’

‘Reading magazines.’

‘Did you go out and get these magazines for her?’

‘No.’

‘How did she get hold of them? Did she go out?’

‘No. I don’t think she ever went out.’

‘Why not?’

‘I have no idea. She only stayed a few days.’

‘Was she hiding?’

‘I didn’t get that impression.’

‘Where did the magazines come from?’

‘She must have brought them with her.’

‘Who put her letters in the post?’

‘I don’t think anybody did.’

‘Did she ever ask you to post letters for her?’

‘No.’

‘Or to convey a message for her?’

‘No.’

It’s easy, because it’s true.

‘Did she sleep with the clients?’

‘Of course.’

‘Who, for example?’

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t always there.’

‘But while you were there?’

‘I didn’t pay any attention.’

‘Were you jealous?’

‘Not a bit.’

‘She’s pretty, though.’

‘I’m used to it.’

‘Were there clients who came specially for her?’

‘You’d have to ask my mother that.’

‘We have.’

‘And what did she say?’

In this way, they force him almost every day to relive a little of the life of the apartment. He talks about it with a detachment that visibly surprises the old man, especially as he senses that he is being honest.

‘Did anybody ever call her on the phone?’

‘There’s only one phone that works in the building, the one that belongs to the caretaker.’

‘I know.’

So what is he trying to find out?

‘Have you ever seen this man?’

‘No.’

‘What about this one?’

‘No.’

‘Or this one?’

‘No.’

People he doesn’t know. Why does the old man take care to hide part of the photographs, to let him see only the faces, to prevent him from making out the clothes?

Because they’re officers, of course! Maybe high-ranking officers.

‘Did you know that Anna Loeb was wanted?’

‘I never heard about that.’

‘Were you also unaware that her father was shot?’

Actually, it’s at least a year since the brewer Loeb was shot, because a whole clandestine arsenal was found in the vats of his brewery.

‘I had no idea he was her father. I never knew her surname.’

‘And yet it was in your apartment that she came to take refuge.’

It’s amazing actually. He slept two or three times with the daughter of the brewer Loeb, who had been one of the richest and most prominent men in the town, and he didn’t even know! Every day, thanks to the old man, he discovers new secrets.

‘Did she leave you?’

‘I can’t remember. I think she was still there when I was arrested.’

‘Aren’t you sure?’

What is he supposed to reply? What do they know? He never took a liking to Anny, who seemed so contemptuous – not even that, so absent, which is worse – when he made love to her. None of that matters now. Has she been arrested? Have they carried out a full-scale raid since he has been in prison?

‘I think so. I’d been drinking the day before.’

‘At Timo’s?’

‘Maybe. And other places.’

‘With Kromer?’

The old bandit never forgets a thing!

‘With lots of people.’

‘Before taking refuge in your apartment, Anna Loeb was the mistress of a succession of officers, and she always chose them carefully.’

‘Oh!’

‘More for the position they occupied than for their physique or their money.’

He doesn’t reply. It wasn’t a question.

‘She was in the pay of a foreign power and she went to look for shelter in your apartment.’

‘It’s not hard for a woman who isn’t too bad-looking to be accepted in a brothel.’

‘You admit it was a brothel?’

‘Call it what you like. There were women who made love with clients.’

‘Including officers?’

‘Maybe. I wasn’t standing guard on the door.’

‘Or at the fanlight?’

He knows everything! He guesses everything! He must have inspected the apartment with particular care.

‘Did you know their names?’

‘No.’

Is it possible that the old man’s sector is working against the other sector, the one where Frank was hit with a brass ruler? The word ‘officer’ keeps recurring with a frequency that intrigues him.

‘Would you recognize them?’

‘No.’

‘They sometimes stayed a long time, didn’t they?’

‘Just long enough to do what they came for.’

‘Did they talk?’

‘I wasn’t in the room.’

‘They talked,’ the old man asserts. ‘*Men always talk.*’

As if he knows as much about it as Lotte! He knows where he is going, in his patient, meticulous way. He is far-sighted. He has all the time in the world. He grabs a piece of thread and delicately untangles the whole skein.

The time for soup has passed. Frank will find the liquid ice cold in his dish, as happens almost every day.

‘When women get men to talk, it’s so that they can repeat what they’ve said to someone else.’

He shrugs.

‘Anna Loeb made love with you, but you claim she didn’t say anything to you. She didn’t go out and yet she sent messages.’

His head is spinning. He has to keep going to the end, until he can get into bed, until he can finally sink into the planks, his eyes closed, his ears humming, and listen to the blood circulating in his arteries, feel his body live, think at last about something other than all these stupid things that allow him to go on, think about a window, four walls, a room with a bed, a stove – he doesn’t dare add a cradle – a man who leaves in the morning knowing he will come back, a woman who stays and knows she isn’t alone, she will never be alone, the sun rising and setting always in the same place, a tin box you take with you under your arm like a treasure, grey felt boots, a flowering geranium, things so simple that people don’t really know them, or else despise them, even go so far as to complain when they have them.

He has so little time!

3.

Last night was one of the most exhausting sessions. They must have woken him up in the middle of the night, and he was still in the office when a volley of shots was heard from the courtyard, followed by a single, fainter shot, as usual. He looked at the windows and realized that it was already dawn.

It was one of the few times when he nearly flew off the handle. He really had the impression the interrogation was being dragged out for the sake of it, that he was being asked questions at random. He was asked, for instance, about Ressler, the editor. Frank replied that he didn't know him, that he had only spoken to him once.

'Who introduced you?'

Kromer again . . . It would be so much simpler and less exhausting to throw him right in it once and for all, especially since, as far as Frank is able to judge, he has been careful to go to ground somewhere out of the way.

He was asked about people he doesn't know. He was shown photographs. Either it is to tire him, to push him over the edge, or else they imagine that he knows much more than he really does.

By the time he left the office, the air smelled of dawn, with a touch of smoke from the neighbourhood. Did he see the open window? He can't remember. He saw it, but he would be unable to state categorically – to the old man, for example, if he was asked a specific question – whether it was in a dream or not. He is sure, though, that he had his eyes open.

He can't remember, ultimately. And now he is already being dragged from his bed again. He walks, with the plainclothes man in front and the soldier behind, surrounded by the sounds of two pairs of shoes. He is still asleep. He has time. Usually, he is made to wait on the grey-painted bench. This time, they don't let him wait; they cross the room without stopping and immediately enter the office.

And there in the office are Lotte and Minna.

Does he give them a look of annoyance? He isn't aware of it. He sees his mother give a start, open her mouth as if to let out a cry, then contain herself and stammer with an element of pity in her voice that he no longer understands:

‘Frank!’

She feels the need to wipe her eyes with one of those lace handkerchiefs she is in the habit of drenching in perfume. As for Minna, she hasn't moved, hasn't said anything. He sees her standing there stiff and pale, with tears running down her cheeks.

He hasn't thought about it lately: it is his missing teeth, his beard, and probably also his red eyes, his jacket that has really lost its shape. He hasn't taken the trouble to change his shirt.

That upsets them, obviously. Not him. He is almost as cold as the old man. From the first glance, he has noticed that his mother is dressed in grey and white. It's an old habit that takes hold of her every time she wants to look distinguished. That was more or less how she used to dress when she came to see him at school – the real one – and even then, although they hadn't yet come back into fashion, she would wear transparent half-veils.

She smells clean. She smells of rice powder. Which means she has come from home. If she was in prison, she wouldn't have been able to spruce herself up like this.

Why has she brought Minna? To see them, you would think they were the mother and the female cousin come to pay a visit to the young man. Minna looks every inch the cousin, with her sky-blue suit, white blouse and almost total absence of make-up. She has got thinner.

He looks around for the suitcase, the parcel they have brought him. There are none in the room, and he thinks he understands; Lotte's embarrassment proves to him that he's right. She doesn't know how to start. It's the old man she is looking at, much more than her son – maybe to make it clear to Frank that she hasn't come of her own free will?

‘They were good enough to let us come and see you, Frank. So I asked if I could bring Minna, who's always talking about you, and this gentleman kindly gave us permission.’

It isn't true. It's an idea of the old man's, he would swear to it. Two weeks ago, he talked about Bertha, a week ago about Anny. Now, with his

air of stopping off along the way, he has got to Minna. He doesn't need to hurry, because he has her to hand. Minna looks away, embarrassed.

It's clever all the same. Because Frank doesn't believe in chance. The old man has finally understood that if there was one girl, among all those who have been through Lotte's, for whom Frank might have different feelings, it was Minna.

In actual fact, Frank doesn't like her. He was deliberately hard towards her. He no longer remembers exactly what he did to her. There are many things he did outside that he has wiped from his memory. But he feels somewhat ashamed in front of Minna. He is aware that he behaved badly to her.

All three of them are standing. It's a bit ridiculous. The old man is the first to become aware of it, and has two chairs moved forwards for Lotte and her companion. With his hand, he authorizes Frank to use the stool from the seated interrogations.

Then he resumes his absent air. To see him, you would swear that what is happening has nothing to do with him. He leafs through some files, then goes back to his pieces of paper and sorts through them.

'I have to talk to you, Frank. Don't be afraid.'

Why does she add these last words? What has he got to be afraid of?

'I've done a lot of thinking in these past six weeks.'

Six weeks already? Or only? The word strikes him. He would like to look at her less severely, but he can't. For her part, she doesn't dare raise her eyes to him for fear of bursting into tears. Does he really look so bad because he is missing two front teeth and has stopped taking care of himself?

'You know, Frank, I'm sure that if you have done something wrong, even something serious, it's because you let yourself be led astray. You're too young. I know you. I was wrong to let you go around with friends who are older than you.'

She's lying badly. Usually, Lotte's a good liar. Talking about her clients, or about men in general, she happily admits to taking them for a ride. Is she deliberately lying badly, to confirm that she is only here because she was ordered to come?

There is no car in the courtyard. They must have come by tram.

'Some important people have advised me, Frank.'

'Who?'

‘Mr Hamling, for example.’

The fact that she utters that name means she is allowed to.

‘I know you don’t like him very much, but you’re wrong. You’ll understand one day. He’s an old friend, maybe my only friend. He knew me when I was a little girl and, if I hadn’t been so stupid . . .’

Frank’s eyes have narrowed. A thought has occurred to him, one he has never had before. Mightn’t there be a good reason for the chief inspector coming to see them so often, being so familiar despite Lotte’s more than dubious position, giving the impression that he has taken her under his wing, assuming the right to talk to Frank as he sometimes has?

He is almost as tense as before. His face has suddenly started looking like it did when he was having a particularly bad day back in Green Street, and Lotte, who might have been about to impart him a confidence, beats a retreat.

He prefers it that way. If Kurt Hamling should happen to be his father, he absolutely doesn’t want to know.

‘He’s always taken an interest in us, in you—’

‘All right!’ he cuts in.

‘He knows you better than you think. He’s also convinced that you let yourself be led astray, but that you’ll refuse to admit it. As he puts it so well, it’s wrong to make it a point of honour, Frank.’

‘I don’t have any honour.’

‘These gentlemen are patient with you, I know.’

Really? What does that mean?

‘They’ve let you receive parcels. They allowed me today to come with Minna, who’s so worried about you.’

‘Is she ill?’

‘Who?’

‘Minna.’

Why does he cut the thread of Lotte’s thoughts? Now she no longer knows what to reply and tries to throw the old man a questioning look.

‘No, she isn’t ill. What makes you think that? I had her thoroughly examined last week. A young doctor who doesn’t know his stuff wanted to operate on her, but the other one said it isn’t necessary. She’s already feeling better.’

He senses something mysterious and stifling. ‘Well, now she has time to rest,’ he says on the off-chance.

His mother hesitates. Why? Then, as the old man doesn't seem to have any objection, she risks saying:

'We've reopened the business.'

'With what girls?'

'There are two new ones, apart from Minna.'

'I thought your friend Hamling advised you to close down.'

'At the time, yes. He didn't yet know the harm that Anny did.'

He has understood. He understands all at once why they are here. He understands everything. The old man doesn't let any opportunity go by.

'Did they ask you to continue?'

'They explained it was for the best, from every point of view.'

In other words, the apartment in Green Street has become a kind of mousetrap. Who is looking through the fanlight now, trying to listen in on conversations on behalf of these gentlemen?

That's why Lotte is so embarrassed . . .

'So in other words,' he says grudgingly, without a trace of irony, 'everything's going well.'

'Very well.'

'Is Sissy better?'

'I think so.'

'Haven't you seen her?'

'There's so much work, you know. I don't know if it's the weather.'

What can they still say to each other? Worlds separate them, an infinite void. Even that perfumed handkerchief, which assumes such importance in the room that Lotte notices and stuffs it in her bag.

'Listen to me, Frank.'

'Yes.'

'You're young.'

'You already said that.'

'I know better than you that you aren't bad. Don't look at me like that. You have to realize I've never thought about anything but you, that everything I've done, since you were born, I've done for you, and that now I'd give the rest of my life for you to be happy.'

It isn't her fault that he is distracted in spite of himself. He just about makes out the meaning of her words. He is looking at Minna's handbag. Except for being red, it is exactly the same as the black bag Sissy had, the famous bag with the key that he waved about on the waste ground and

finally put down on a heap of snow. He never did find out if she came to get it.

‘I told them you knew Kromer, because it’s true. He was your friend, and I don’t want you to keep denying it. I can’t get it out of my mind that he was your evil genius and that he was clever enough to get away and leave you in it.’

Is that it? Is that what she came to tell him: that Kromer is out of harm’s way? He is too close to the stove. He feels hot. Through the window – it’s the first time he has sat in this spot – he can see the gate, the sentry box, the guard and a section of street. It doesn’t have any effect on him, seeing the street again, the passing trams.

‘You really have to tell them the whole truth, everything you know, and they’ll take it into account. I’m sure of it. I trust them.’

The old man has never seemed so far away.

‘Tomorrow they may let me come and leave a parcel. What would you like me to put in it?’

He is ashamed for her, for himself, for all of them. He is tired. He feels like answering, ‘Just shit!’

He would have done it once. But since then he has learned to be patient. Or maybe it’s weakness.

‘Whatever you like,’ he stammers reluctantly.

‘It isn’t fair that you should pay for the others, don’t you see? I’ve also done a lot of harm without meaning to, I realize that now.’

And she is paying for it by agreeing to her brothel becoming a trap for perverts! The most surprising thing is that it would have seemed quite normal to Frank four or five months ago. In fact, he doesn’t get indignant. He is thinking about something else. Throughout the conversation, he has been thinking about something else, without realizing that he hasn’t taken his eyes off Minna’s handbag.

‘Just tell them what you know. Don’t try to outwit them. You’ll get out of here, you’ll see. I’ll take good care of you and . . .’

He has stopped hearing her. It is all very far away. True, he is always tired, and there are times during the day, especially in the mornings, when he feels dizzy. It’s all down to exhaustion.

She stands up. She smells good. She is all bright and rustling, with fur around her neck.

‘Promise me, Frank. Promise your mother . . . Minna, you tell him.’

Minna doesn't dare look at him.

'I'm very unhappy, Frank!' she manages to say with some difficulty.

'You still haven't told me what you'd like me to bring you,' Lotte resumes.

That's when he says it. He is the first to be surprised. He always thought it would happen much later, right at the end. He feels too weary all of a sudden. He speaks without thinking, without having the impression that he has made a decision.

He says in a low voice, aware of what these words mean to him, but only to him:

'Couldn't I see Holst?'

There is something astonishing about what happens next. It isn't his mother who replies. She probably doesn't even understand and must be quite lost. As for Minna, she has stifled a kind of sob that could pass for a hiccup. Minna knows a lot more about it than Lotte.

But it is the old man who raises his head, looks at him and asks:

'Do you mean Gerhardt Holst?'

'Yes.'

'That's strange . . .'

He searches among his pieces of paper and ends up fishing one out, which he examines attentively. While this goes on, Frank stops breathing.

'He's just put in a request for a visit.'

'A visit to me?'

'Yes.'

Of course he is not going to leap for joy and start prancing about in front of them! But his face is transfigured. Now, like Minna's, his eyes are full of tears. All the same, he doesn't yet dare believe in it. It's too good to be true. It would mean that he isn't wrong. It would mean . . .

'Has he asked to see me?'

'Wait . . . No.'

He freezes. When it comes down to it, the old man must be a sadist.

'That's not exactly it. A man named Gerhardt Holst has made a request for a visit. He's even gone to the highest authorities. But it isn't for him.'

Hurry up, for God's sake! And Lotte's listening to all this as if listening to the radio!

'It's for his daughter.'

No! No! No! He mustn't cry. He can do whatever he likes, but he mustn't cry, or he might spoil everything. It isn't true! It isn't possible! The old man will grab another piece of paper and discover that he has made a mistake.

'You see, Frank,' Lotte says in a voice blissfully throbbing with emotion, as if her radio has just played a sentimental song, 'you see, everyone has confidence in you. Like I was telling you, you have to get out of here, and to do that you should listen to these gentlemen.'

Fool! Idiot! He isn't even capable of hating her, and it is best that she remains unaware of the gulf there is between them.

It is again Lotte who asks, with the expression of a pious worshipper addressing a monsignor:

'Have you granted permission, sir?'

'Not yet. The request has just been sent through to me by another office. I haven't had time to examine it.'

'I think you'd give her so much pleasure! She's our next-door neighbour. They've known each other for years.'

It isn't true. Why doesn't she shut up? Or rather, what does it matter what she says? Even if it all falls through, even if Sissy doesn't come, the fact remains that Holst made the request.

They have understood each other. Frank was right. Let Holst come instead, and it will be the same, not completely, but it will have the same meaning.

Let them have done with it, Lord! Let them do him the mercy of not questioning him any more this morning and allow him to go back to his room. There! He thinks of it quite naturally as 'his room'. All he wants is to collapse on to his bed and hug that truth to himself while it is still warm, to stop it from evaporating.

'She's a respectable girl, a really genuine girl, you can believe me.'

How can you hate someone so stupid, even if she is his mother? And the other one with that fake cousin act of hers, who takes advantage of the fact that they are standing to go close to him and touch him without anyone noticing!

'I thought,' the old man cuts in, 'you were asking earlier to see Gerhardt Holst?'

'Him or her.'

'You don't have a preference?'

As long as he isn't making a blunder!

‘No.’

It just took a glance through the glasses to indicate to one of the altar boys with moustaches that it’s time to take him back. He isn’t sure afterwards how he left the office. His mother and Minna have stayed there. What else is Lotte going to say about Sissy?

He gets to his room almost at the same time as the dish, which is still hot, and he is content to hold it tight between his knees, without eating, just letting the heat of it seep into him. The window over there, above the gymnasium, is closed. It doesn’t matter. From now on, at a pinch, he can do without it. There is a lump in his throat. He would like to talk. He would like to talk to Holst, as if Holst were here.

Before anything else, there is a question that it is vital to ask.

‘How did you understand?’

It seems impossible. It’s wonderful that something like this should be possible. Frank has done everything for Holst not to understand. He didn’t even understand himself. He was content to prowling around Holst, and there were times when he forced himself to believe that he hated or despised him; he laughed at his tin box and ill-fitting boots.

When did it happen?

Was it the night Holst, on his way back from the tram depot, found him with his back against the tannery wall, his knife open in his hand?

He must stop. It’s too much. He must keep calm, remain sitting quietly on the edge of his bed. He won’t even lie down, because then it would be worse, then he might start yelling as he looks at the window.

He won’t go mad. Now is not the time. He will recover his composure little by little. The fact that it has happened means it is almost over.

He has always understood. It’s one of those certainties you don’t try to explain to yourself. In any case, he wouldn’t have the strength to hold out much longer.

Holst has understood!

What about Sissy?

Did she, too, always know it would happen like this? Frank knew. Holst knew. It’s an incredible thing to say. It feels like a blasphemy. But it’s the truth.

Holst should have come and killed him on Sunday night, or the following morning, and he didn’t.

It had to happen like this. Frank couldn't do anything else. He didn't yet know why, but he felt it.

The reason he hasn't been afraid of torture, the officer with the ruler or the old man and his acolytes is that nobody will ever be able to make him suffer the way he made himself suffer when he pushed Kromer into the bedroom.

Will the old man say yes?

He absolutely must hold out a hope, to give the man the idea that it'll be a useful move. Frank can't wait for them to come and get him. He won't promise anything, because that would be clumsy, but he will let it be understood that he will be much more talkative *afterwards*. Just let them come and get him.

He'll cut them some slack. He'll cut them some slack as of today, a good deal of slack. About whatever they like. About Kromer, for example: it won't make any difference, now that he's in a safe place.

Deep down, he even wonders what he would like most: to talk to Holst or to Sissy. In actual fact, he has nothing to say to Sissy. He just has to look at her. And she has to look at him.

'Tell me, Mr Holst . . .

'How did you discover, Mr Holst, that a man, whoever he is . . .'

He doesn't have the words. None of them expresses what he would like to say.

'He can be a tram driver, can't he, or anything? He can wear boots that make little boys turn to look at him in the street and the young men shrug their shoulders . . . He can . . . He can . . . I know what you're going to say . . . That none of that matters . . . He just has to do what he has to, because everything is of equal importance . . . But what about me, Mr Holst, what could I do?'

Holst can't possibly have put in a request for a visit on behalf of Sissy. Frank is starting to weaken, to ask questions, to doubt. Could it be one of the old man's tricks? If it is, with what hatred Frank would pursue him down into the depths of hell!

And to think that Holst, who avoids all contact with the occupiers, who must have suffered at their hands, should have approached the highest authorities, as the old man put it! To do that, he would have been obliged to go through middle men, to make compromises, to humiliate himself in front of people!

They don't come to get him. It's taking a long time. He can't sleep. He doesn't want to sleep. He would like to get it over with immediately.

He has lain down, though, without meaning to. He no longer knows if he put the soup dish down on the floor. If he knocks it over, the smell will linger all night. It happened once. He feels like crying. He won't tell Holst that he cried. He won't tell anyone. Nobody can see him. He reaches out an arm, as if there is someone next to him, as if it is still possible there might be someone next to him one day.

It might have been possible, but everything would have had to be different!

He can't accept the idea that Chief Inspector Kurt Hamling could be his father.

Why does he think about that?

He doesn't think about anything. He cries like a baby. He is sleepy. In such cases, his nurse would put a bottle between his lips, and he would snuffle two or three times, start sucking and calm down.

It won't be much longer now. Not that time matters. How old is the woman at the window? Twenty-two? Twenty-five? Where will she be in ten years, or in five? Maybe her partner will be dead? Maybe he's already dead? Maybe she herself has in her body the germ of some disease that will carry her off?

What will Holst say to him? How will he behave?

Sissy will be silent, he knows. Or else she will simply say, 'Frank!'

The old man will be present. It doesn't matter. He's hot. Does he have a fever? As long as he doesn't fall ill, not now! The old man is wearing his glasses, he is dressed in black from head to foot. Why, when he is usually in grey? Frank is a Catholic. He has had Protestant friends and he has occasionally attended their services. He has seen pastors.

He has to be careful, because the American desk is changing shape and becoming a kind of altar. Lotte is ridiculous to dress as she does. It happens to her whenever she thinks it's necessary to look distinguished. Then she overdoes the greys and whites. He vaguely remembers the photograph of a queen who dressed like that, but in an even softer, more diaphanous style. That was a queen, though. Lotte keeps a brothel, and she is diaphanous, too. As for poor Minna, she looks as if she is straight out of a convent. She is Cousin Minna.

Why is she crying? Lotte drops her handkerchief, which is rolled up into a ball, and it is Holst who bends down to pick it up and hand it to her at the end of his long arm. He says nothing, because now is not the time to speak. The old man reads from his little pieces of paper and almost gets confused. It is a very complicated prayer, and of the utmost importance.

Sissy looks Frank in the eyes, so intensely that his pupils hurt.

The revolver has gone, and in its place is a key, a key they will be given instead of rings. The idea isn't a silly one. He has never heard of it being done before, but it is fine. Who are they going to give it to? It's obviously the key to a room, with a window, a blind. It's getting dark. They will have to lower the blind and light the lamp.

He looks. His eyes are open. The light has just been switched on in his classroom. The plainclothes man is standing by his bed, the soldier is waiting at the door.

'I'm coming,' he stammers. 'Don't worry, I'm coming . . .'

He can't move. He is forced to make a violent effort. His legs are stiff, his back hurts. The man waits. The courtyard is dark. The floodlight sweeps across it like a lighthouse by the sea. Frank has never seen the sea. He never will. He only knows it through films, and in films there are always lighthouses.

He went to the cinema twice with Sissy. Twice!

'I'm coming . . .'

He puts his jacket back on. He has the feeling he has forgotten something. Oh, yes! He has to be very nice to the old man, to encourage him.

The little office. The stove hums. It's much too hot. That may be deliberate, too. They leave him standing, it's a standing session, when today, he doesn't know why, he would have been relieved to sit down.

'Why don't you tell me a little bit about Kromer?'

The man doesn't let anything get past him! He has realized that now is the right moment!

'All right.'

He would have preferred to talk about the revolver, which he can see on the desk. That way, he would be done with that threat, which they must be keeping for the end.

'Why did he give you money?'

'Because I supplied him with merchandise.'

‘What kind of merchandise?’

‘Watches.’

‘Was he trading in watches?’

He wants to ask, ‘Are you going to grant the authorization?’ Throughout the interrogation, he will swallow his tongue to avoid asking that question.

‘Someone had asked him for watches.’

‘Who?’

‘I think it was an officer.’

‘You think so?’

‘That’s what he told me.’

‘What officer?’

‘I don’t know his name. A high-ranking officer who collects watches.’

‘Where did you meet him?’

‘I never saw him.’

‘How did he pay you?’

‘He paid Kromer, and Kromer gave me my share.’

‘How big was your share?’

‘Half.’

‘Where did you buy the watches?’

‘I didn’t buy them.’

‘Did you steal them?’

‘I took them.’

‘Where?’

‘From the house of a watchmaker I used to know, who’s dead.’

‘Did you kill him?’

‘No. He died a year ago.’

It’s going too fast, much too fast. Normally, there should have been enough here for three or four sessions, but he feels as if he is caught up in a fever, as if he is the one who is now hurrying things along, to get to the end more quickly.

‘Who owned the watches?’

The old man consults one of his pieces of paper. They know. Frank could swear they have known it all right from the start. What’s the point of all this play-acting? What more do they want to find out? What are they hoping for? After all, it’s their time they are wasting much more than his.

‘They were hidden in his sister’s house. I went there, took the watches and left.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I went back and killed her,’ he says sullenly, like a child caught doing something wrong.

‘Why?’

‘Because she’d recognized me.’

‘Who were you with?’

‘I was alone.’

‘Where did it happen?’

‘In the country.’

‘A long way from town?’

‘About ten kilometres.’

‘Did you get there on foot?’

‘Yes.’

‘No!’

‘You’re right: no.’

‘How did you get there?’

‘By bicycle.’

‘You don’t own a bicycle.’

‘I borrowed one.’

‘Who from?’

‘I rented it.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t remember. From a garage in the upper town.’

‘Would you recognize the garage if you were taken to the upper town?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And if you were shown the van you used, would you recognize that?’

They know that, too. It’s depressing.

‘You’ll see it in the courtyard tomorrow morning.’

He doesn’t reply. He’s thirsty. His shirt is sodden under the arms, and his temples are starting to throb.

‘How did you meet Carl Adler?’

‘I don’t know him.’

‘He drove the van.’

‘It was dark.’

‘What do you know about him?’

‘I don’t know anything.’

‘But you know he dealt with radios?’

‘I had no idea.’

‘There was a transmitter in the van.’

‘I didn’t see it. It was dark. I didn’t look in the back.’

‘Who was in the back?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘But there was somebody?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must have been introduced. Who introduced you?’

‘Kromer.’

‘Where?’

‘In a bar opposite the cinema.’

‘Who was he with?’

‘He was on his own.’

‘When he introduced his friends, what names did he tell you?’

‘He didn’t tell me any names.’

‘Would you recognize the man who was in the back?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Describe him.’

‘He was quite big, with a moustache.’

He’s lying. It’s more time gained.

‘Carry on.’

‘He was wearing a boiler suit.’

‘In the bar?’

‘Yes.’

It looks like they don’t know that one, so Frank isn’t running any risks.

‘Wait. I think he had a scar.’

‘Where?’

He thinks of the brass ruler. He improvises, ‘Across one of his cheeks . . .

The left one . . . Yes . . .’

‘You’re lying, aren’t you?’

‘No.’

‘I’d be sorry if you were lying, because that would prevent me from granting the authorization I’ve been asked for.’

‘I swear to you I don’t know him.’

‘Did he have a scar?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What about the rest of your description?’

‘I really don’t know. I’m sure I’d recognize him if I saw him, but I can’t describe him.’

‘And the bar?’

‘No, that’s true.’

‘Carl Adler?’

‘I don’t know why I remember his name. I saw him again twice in the street. He didn’t recognize me. Or pretended not to recognize me.’

‘And the wireless?’

‘They didn’t tell me about it.’

Will he get his authorization? Anxiously, he scrutinizes the face of the old man, who must be taking a secret pleasure in looking even more inscrutable than usual. He rolls a cigarette. Then slowly, softly, he says:

‘Carl Adler was shot yesterday by another department. He didn’t talk. We really need to track down his accomplices.’

Abruptly, Frank turns red. Are they going to offer him a deal, like the one Lotte agreed to?

It’s true that he doesn’t know anything. They must be starting to realize that. But he could find out. They could use him to find out.

He’s finding it hard to breathe. He doesn’t know where to look any more. Once again, he feels ashamed. What will he do if they suddenly put the question to him, if they hand him the deal on a platter? What would Holst do?

He closes his eyes, braces himself. It was too good to be true. He mustn’t count on it any more. It’ll probably never happen. He doesn’t cry. Now is not the time to start crying.

He waits. The old man must be playing with his pieces of paper. Why isn’t he saying anything? The only sound is the humming of the stove. Time passes. Then Frank ventures to open his eyes and sees the acolyte, standing next to him, waiting to take him back. The soldier is already at the door.

It’s over. Maybe until later, maybe until tomorrow.

They don’t salute each other. Here, they never salute. It must be the way they do things in this place, and it gives an impression of emptiness.

It’s very cold outside, much colder than the previous days. The sky is as clear as a blade, and the ridges of the roofs seem sharper than usual.

Tomorrow morning there will be flowers of frost on the windowpanes.

4.

It's odd. He has spent the greater part of his life – by far the greater part! – hating fate, with a hatred that is almost personal, hating it to the point of searching it out in every corner to defy it, to fight it.

And now all of a sudden, when he was least expecting it, fate has given him a gift.

There is no other way of putting it. Obviously, it's possible that the old man, in spite of his fish blood, has had a moment of weakness, of pity. He may also have committed a technical error, but that's highly unlikely, because he's never made a mistake before. More probably it happened somewhere else, in another sector, the high authority that Holst approached, where someone who knows nothing about the case put his initials on the request, meaning 'yes'.

Holst is downstairs! Holst is in the little office, by the stove, and next to him, slightly further back, is Sissy.

They're both here!

Frank wasn't told. They came to get him as if for an interrogation. It has been about five days since his mother and Minna came, there have been twelve or fifteen more interrogations, and he is almost at the end of his tether, feeling so weak that he has had mental blanks.

Holst is here, and Frank has stopped dead on seeing him. He has seen Sissy, but he continues to look at Holst, and his feet won't move, his body won't move. What's wonderful is that Holst doesn't think of opening his mouth.

What would he say anyway?

As if he has understood the question in Frank's eyes, as if replying to it, he pushes Sissy forwards slightly.

The old man is here, of course, behind his desk. The acolytes are in their posts, too. There is the stove, the window, the courtyard, the sentry by his box.

But in fact there is nothing at all. There is Sissy, in a black coat that makes her look very thin and a black beret from which her blonde hair peeps out. She looks at him. She isn't on the verge of tears, like Lotte. She isn't moved to pity, like Minna. Could it be she doesn't even notice his two missing teeth, or his beard, or his crumpled clothes?

She doesn't go to him. They don't dare move, either of them. Would they do so if they dared? It's by no means certain.

She half opens her mouth. She is about to speak. She says first, as he has so often expected:

'Frank . . .'

She is determined to say something more, and he's scared.

'I've come to tell you . . .'

'I know,' he murmurs, embarrassed.

He thought she was going to say, he's afraid she will say, ' . . . that I don't bear you any grudge.' Or else, ' . . . that I forgive you.'

But that is not what she says. She is still looking at him. It isn't possible that two people have ever looked at each other with such intensity.

'I've come to tell you that I love you,' she says simply.

She is holding her bag, her little black bag in her hand. Things are happening almost like in his dream, except that the old man, who has just meticulously rolled a cigarette, sticks out his tongue to lick the paper.

Frank doesn't reply. He has nothing to say. He doesn't have the right to say anything. He just has to hurry up and look at her. He has to look at Holst, too. He doesn't have his felt boots on, the ones he wore when he drove a tram. He's wearing shoes like everyone else. He's in grey. He's holding his hat in his hand.

Frank doesn't move, doesn't dare move. He senses that his lips are moving, but not to speak. It may just be a nervous thing, he doesn't know. It is then that Holst advances, heedless of the old man and the altar boys with their moustaches, and places a hand on his shoulder, exactly as Frank has always thought a father would do.

Does Holst think he owes him an explanation? Is he afraid Frank hasn't completely understood? Does he still have a doubt?

His hand presses down slightly on his shoulder and he recites – he really does sound as if he is reciting – in a voice at once grave and neutral, reminiscent of some of the ceremonies during Holy Week:

‘I had a son, a boy not much older than you. His ambition was to be a great doctor. He loved medicine, it was the only thing he cared about. When I lost all my money, he decided to continue his studies, come what may.

‘One day, some expensive products – mercury, platinum – disappeared from the physics lab. Then people started to complain about petty thefts at the university. Finally, a student, rushing into the cloakroom, found my son stealing a wallet.

‘He was twenty-one. As he was being taken to the rector’s office, he jumped out of a window on the second floor . . .’

The pressure of his fingers has increased.

Frank would like to say something. There is one thing in particular he would like to say, although it’s a thing that means nothing, that might be misinterpreted: he would have liked to be Holst’s son, he would like to be Holst’s son. He would be so happy – and it would take such a weight off him – to utter the word ‘Father!’

Sissy has that right. Sissy hasn’t taken her eyes off him. He couldn’t say, as he could for Minna, if she is thinner or paler than before. It doesn’t matter. She came. She wanted to come, and Holst agreed, Holst took her by the hand and brought her to see Frank.

‘There you are,’ he concludes. ‘It’s a hard job, being a man.’

He seems to smile weakly as he says these words, as if to apologize.

‘Sissy talks about you to Mr Wimmer all day long. I’ve found work in an office, but I finish early.’

He turns to the window, so that they can look at each other, just the two of them.

There are no rings. There is no key. Nor are there any prayers, but Holst’s words take their place.

Sissy is here. Holst is here.

They mustn’t stay too long. Frank might not be able to bear it. This is all there is. This is all there will ever have been. This is his entire share. There was nothing before and there will be nothing afterwards.

This is his wedding! This is his honeymoon, this is his life, a life that has to be lived in one go, swallowed like a pill, while the old man fiddles with his pieces of paper.

They won’t have a window that opens, or linen they put out to dry, and they won’t have a cradle.

If there had been all that, there might not have been anything at all, just Frank struggling against fate. It isn't how long something lasts that matters. What matters is that it *happens*.

'Sissy . . .'

He doesn't know if he has murmured her name or just thought it. His lips have moved, but he can't stop them moving. His hands move, too, move ceaselessly forwards, with a movement he stops just in time. Sissy's hands do the same. Sissy has found a way to hold back by keeping her fingers tight on her bag.

For her sake, too, and for Holst's, it mustn't go on for too long.

'We'll try and come again,' Holst says.

Frank smiles, still looking at Sissy, and nods, knowing perfectly well it isn't true, just as Holst knows it, just as Sissy probably knows it, too.

'You'll come again, yes.'

That's all. His eyes can't take it any more. He is afraid he will faint. He hasn't eaten anything since yesterday. He has hardly slept for a week.

Holst goes to his daughter and takes her by the arm. It is he who says:

'Be brave, Frank.'

Sissy doesn't say another word. She lets herself be taken out, her head turned towards him, her eyes fixed on him with an expression he has never before seen in human eyes.

They haven't touched, not even with their fingers. They didn't have to.

They have gone. He can still see them through the window, in the whiteness of the courtyard, and Sissy's face is still turned towards him.

Hurry up! He's going to cry out! It's too much! Hurry up!

He can't stay in one place any more. He walks over to the old man and opens his mouth. He is going to gesticulate, to speak vehemently, but no sound emerges from his throat, and he stands there frozen.

She came. She is here. She is in him. She is his. Holst has blessed them.

By what aberration, by what unprecedented generosity, does fate, after such a gift, the kind it gives to few men, grant him another? Instead of questioning him, as should have happened in all probability, the old man stands up and puts on his hat and fur-lined coat – it is the first time he has done this – and Frank is taken back to his room.

He owed it to himself to spend his wedding night without sleeping, and he hasn't been interrupted.

It's best that he should no longer feel his fatigue, that he should be calm and self-controlled when he gets up. He is waiting for them, looking at the window over there, but it doesn't really matter if they come for him before it is opened.

Sissy is in him.

He walks behind the plainclothes man and in front of the soldier. They make him wait, but it doesn't bother him. It's the last time. It has to be the last time. No doubt there is a new light in his face, because when the old man raises his head, he is speechless for a moment, then looks at him with anxious curiosity.

'Sit down.'

'No.'

This won't be a seated interrogation, he has decided that.

'Before anything else, I ask permission to make an important statement.'

He will speak calmly. It will give more weight to his words.

'I stole the watches and I killed Miss Vilmos, the sister of the watchmaker in my village. I'd already killed one of your officers, on the corner of the alley by the tannery, just to get his revolver, because I wanted a revolver. I've done much more shameful things than that; I've committed the worst crime in the world, but that's no concern of yours. I'm not a fanatic, or an agitator, or a patriot. I'm a lowlife. Ever since you started interrogating me, I've done my best to play for time, because it was essential to me to have more time. Now it's over.'

He doesn't pause for breath. It is as if he is trying to adopt the old man's icy voice, but at times his voice sounds more like Holst's.

'I don't know anything about the things you're trying to find out. You have my word on that. Even if I knew something, I wouldn't tell you. You can question me for as long as you like, I won't say another word. You can torture me if you want. I'm not afraid of torture. You can also promise to let me live. I don't want to. I want to die as soon as possible. I'll let you decide how.'

'Don't resent me for talking to you like this. I have nothing against you personally. You've been doing your job. But I've decided to remain silent from now on, and these are the last words I'll ever say to you.'

They beat him. They took him down three or four times and beat him. The last time, they stripped him naked in the office. The men with moustaches

set about their work without emotion and without spite. No doubt following orders, they kneed him hard in his private parts, and he turned red because for a moment he thought of Kromer and Sissy.

He has only the soup left to eat. They have taken away the rest.

It won't be long now. If they don't hurry, it might happen by itself.

He still hopes they will take him down to the cellar. Basically, it's his old obsession with being treated differently from the others.

Above the gymnasium, there is still the window that could have been his window, the woman who could have been Sissy.

They finally make up their minds one morning when it has started to snow again. They even seem to be early, because the sky is dark and low. First, they go into the next classroom. He never thought it would be like this. Then, leaving the three men they have chosen waiting on the walkway, they abruptly shove open his door.

He is ready. No point putting his coat on. He knows the score. He hurries. The other three must be cold, and he doesn't want to keep them waiting. In the semi-darkness, he tries to make out their faces, and it's the first time he has shown any curiosity about those in the next classroom.

They are made to walk in single file along the walkway.

There! He has turned up the collar of his jacket, just like the others!

And he has forgotten to look at the window, he is forgetting to think. Of course, he will have plenty of time later.



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